



Otter Specialist Group

## OTTER SPECIALIST GROUP ANNUAL REPORT 2013

### Meetings and Activities

- Co-organizer, **Wild Musteloid Conference**, 18-21 March 2013, Oxford, UK
- **OSG Management Team meeting**, 22 March 2013, Oxford, UK
- **European Otter Workshop 2013**, April 17-19 2013, Kinsale, Co. Cork, Ireland
- **Small Carnivore SG and OSG meeting**, To explore cooperative joint ventures. 12 August, 2013, 11<sup>th</sup> International Mammal Congress, Belfast, Ireland.
- **Red List Q & A**, with SSC and Red List programme officers. 13 August, 2013, 11<sup>th</sup> International Mammal Congress, Belfast, Ireland.
- **Asian Otter Conservation: Methods for research and conservation planning** workshop. 54 participants, 24-29 November 2013, Bangalore, India
- **OSG Asian otter action planning and Red List meeting**, 30 November 2013, Bangalore, India
- Planning meetings for the **12<sup>th</sup> International Otter Congress**, 11-15 August, 2014, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The IUCN *OSG Bulletin* published three issues in 2012-2013 including a special issue with an extensive bibliography of *Lontra canadensis*. The highlight of 2013 was the news that the *OSG Bulletin* will be listed in Scopus. As a result, Scopus's ethical guidelines have been adopted and all manuscripts will undergo a rigorous plagiarism control to comply with state-of-the-art online scientific publishing. All OSG Bulletin articles are available online on the OSG website and also available from the Directory of Open Access Journals (doaj.com). A total of 376 articles are now online. The work of the webmaster and OSG Co-Deputy Chair Lesley Wright is highly appreciated as without her efforts this would not have been possible.

The OSG has developed otter field methodology and conservation workshops to train student and researchers. We have held 8 training workshops in Asia, 3 in South America, 5 in Europe since 2000. We are now developing an [online](#) 10-week otter field methodology and conservation course with Oregon State University which students will be able to access via the internet. We will reach out to many more potential students and this online approach will be much less expensive to fund than an in-class course.

### SPECIES UPDATES

#### AMERICAS

##### **North American river otter** *Lontra canadensis* (submitted by Tom Serfass)

Populations of the North American river otter appear to be doing well. Range expansion has been noted in both native and reintroduced populations in the United States. More detailed information is

available from the United States (a status update was recently completed and populations exist in at least portions of their historic range in each state on the North American continent) then for Canada, and a status update is necessary for the river otter in each of the Canadian Provinces. Recent population expansions in the United States have contributed to more states opening seasons to harvest otters through trapping. To ensure river otters are properly portrayed, the OSG in North America has organized an education committee for the purpose of disseminating factual information to the public about the feeding habits of river otters and their role as predators in aquatic ecosystems. Generally, river otters are a popular species among outdoor enthusiasts in North America (based on recent human dimensions surveys), and the public seems pleased that the species has been recovering. Likewise, river otters are a featured and popular attraction at many zoos and aquaria.

**Sea otter** *Enhydra lutris* (submitted by Angela Doroff)

The status of sea otter populations is variable throughout the species range. There is still active population range expansion occurring in the United States (SE Alaska, Washington), in Canada, and in Japan (northern Hokkaido). Populations in the United States listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act (the SW Population Stock in Alaska and the Southern Sea Otter in California) are not recovering, however, no further population declines have been documented recently in these areas. In California, the southern sea otter translocation management program has been terminated. In Canada, sea otters have been downlisted to a Species of Special Concern and there is a management plan that is soliciting public comment through December 2013. Colleagues in Russia have suggested a review and possible downlisting of the Red Book Listing for sea otter. Anthropogenic threats to the sea otter population continue to be oil spills, land-based pollution in nearshore coastal areas, mortality due to illegal harvest, and commercial fishery-related mortality. Potential climate change related issues for the species include increases in marine biotoxins from algal blooms, ocean acidification impact to food resources, and increased storm events along the Pacific coasts.

**Giant otter** *Pteronura brasiliensis* (submitted by Rob Williams, Caroline Leuchtenberger; additional information Kimberley Lengel, Tim Schikora, Frank Brandstätter)

The Giant Otter is recovering in some areas but threats are also increasing across its range. The species range continues to be reduced from its historical extent with isolated subpopulations occurring across the tropical lowlands of northern and central South America east of the Andes. Noticeable recoveries have occurred, since the commercial international pelt trade was made illegal in 1973, in many protected areas and especially the Pantanal of Brazil, which now supports the largest known contiguous population. However, there are noticeable declines in the recently recovered populations in areas, such as Madre de Dios, Peru, where the species is disappearing outside protected areas. The principal threats

to the species are all human related and include: habitat loss from forest clearance and gold-mining, and disturbance as human activities increase across much of its range. It is also assumed that pollution, especially Mercury from gold-mining, and the many planned hydroelectric projects within the Amazon basin are also likely to negatively impact populations. Twenty major hydroelectric dams are planned over the next 20 years in the Amazon Basin alone.

Research is needed to better ascertain threats and also to establish baseline population levels across much of the species' range.

**Neotropical otter** *Lontra longicaudis* (submitted by Marcelo Rheingantz)

Since the last Red List review last year, little new information has been uncovered. The current status of the Neotropical otter continues as Near Threatened.

With some threatened populations within range, the situation is highly variable, from vulnerable in some countries and regions to stable with good populations in others, such as the populations in Brazil.

However, recent changes in environmental legislation could increase pollution and deforestation in some important areas of occurrence in Brazil. Several other countries (Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Belize, Ecuador, Suriname) list this species as Vulnerable or Threatened in their regional and local Red Lists.

**Southern river otter** *Lontra provocax* (submitted by Maximiliano Sepúlveda)

This species is listed as Endangered A3cd due to an inferred future population decline due to habitat loss and exploitation. Accelerating habitat destruction and degradation throughout the southern river otter's range is the greatest threat to the species, and is inferred (based on current trends) to lead to a future >50% reduction in population size over the next 30 years (3 generations) for those populations using rivers and lakes (freshwater habitats). Those populations using the southern fjords and islands (marine habitats) of Chile the population may be reduced by 50% over the next 30 years due to the use of intensive fishery activities. The distribution of the southern river otter has declined drastically due to combined pressures from the destruction of habitat, removal of vegetation, river and stream canalization, and extensive dredging. Poaching is still a problem especially south of 43° S latitude and in Tierra del Fuego where there is practically no control of hunting. Extirpation of the river otter began in local basins but has become widespread. The lack of re-establishment of the species probably is due to high mortality or reproductive failure following the dispersal of otters into unsuitable areas. This is resulting in a population that is becoming increasingly fragmented and more susceptible to local extinctions through hunting, habitat destruction, human disturbance, predation by domestic dogs, and demographic or environmental stochastic events. Therefore the present status of southern river otter must be considered precarious.

During the last few years, particularly in Chile, where most of the species's distribution is currently present there have been several initiatives of land protection (i.e. Alerce Costero National Park, Valdivian Coastal Reserve, Tantauco Park). While this initiatives are important as they have presence of river otter populations within their limits, these areas are located in undisturbed areas where impacts such as pollution, hunting, disturbance were minor previous to the creation of those protected lands.

## ASIA

**Short-clawed otter** *Aonyx cinereus* (submitted by Lesley Wright)

Overall, the picture is decreasing populations, habitat degradation and local extirpation. Latest reports indicate that in areas where they were once plentiful, they are now seldom or never seen. Habitat is under pressure from increasing human populations, and drainage and conversion of land for oil palm plantations. They are directly persecuted as competitors by the growing prawn farming industry, and

trapped for the fur trade, having been eradicated from several countries where they were formerly common. In Indonesia, there is a growing pet trade.

In Cambodia, a new law is being developed that will, in theory, protect otters; enforcement is likely to be weak. There has been work with government officials in several parts of the range to increase protection for otters. In Indonesia, there is now an ongoing project to engage with pet otter owners to encourage better welfare, more awareness of the source of the animals, and to establish a rehabilitation centre where former pets can be reconditioned to live in the wild, or at least kept in good conditions.

**Smooth otter** *Lutrogale perspicillata* (information supplied by Waseem Khan, Pakistan)

Twenty years ago in Pakistan, the Smooth-coated otter occurred in three provinces: Sindh, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Since then it is serious decline due to hunting for fur trade and it is now extinct in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In Sindh, otter population numbers are increasing. The flash floods in 2010 and 2011 and less interest of buyers of otter skins in the international market have contributed to this. The species has also been re-introduced in four locations in Punjab. Recently in 2011, National Council for Conservation of Wildlife (NCCW) has imposed a complete ban on export of all the wild mammals and their body parts especially the skins, but with little enforcement. Current threats: pollution, mercury, ecotourism, bushmeat market, fur trade, pet trade. Ongoing otter-fishermen conflicts results in many otters being killed each year in Sindh.

**Hairy-nosed otter** *Lutra sumatrana* (submitted by Aadrean, Indonesia)

The Hairy-nosed otter faces many threats to its survival in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. The major threat is the illegal fur trade, increased by high demand and prices in China. The second major threat throughout is habitat destruction. In Thailand, the main threat to this elusive species is further destruction of its favored peat forest habitats. In Cambodia, threat from hydroelectric dams and logging concessions are increasing. In Indonesia, especially Sumatra and Borneo, the main threat is wetlands conversion to oil palm plantations. Another threat is the local pet trade. This threat is increasing because of social media and online markets. Sadly, all known HNO cubs in captivity have died within two weeks.

In Cambodia and Thailand, they are persecuted as raiders of fish traps and damaging the nets that confine fish in aquaculture. In Indonesia, fish farmer set snare traps and shoot the otters.

In March 2013, an otter training workshop was held in Indonesia. Training was conducted by lecturers, researchers, students, staff of the forestry department, NGOs, and otter owners. Networks were initiated and are now sharing information quickly.

## **AFRICA**

**Congo clawless otter** *Aonyx congicus* (submitted by Helene Jacques)

Although this species is widespread within the Congo Basin and poorly known, the Congo clawless otter may still be common in certain undisturbed rainforest locations, but is otherwise thought to be rare to very rare. Otters are rarely seen and difficult to catch, but hunting pressure for bushmeat, as well as habitat degradation, deforestation, road opening for wood exploitation are the major threats and will increase with an escalating human African population.

**Cape clawless otter** *Aonyx capensis* (submitted by Helene Jacques)

It is believed that the population of Cape clawless otter is decreasing throughout its range, mainly as a result of the alteration or degradation of freshwater habitats and riparian vegetation sometimes by bank and shoreline erosion due to unsustainable agriculture. Otters are also killed for food or skins, as a perceived threat to poultry, or as a competitor for fish.

**Spot-necked otter** *Lutra maculicollis* (submitted by Helene Jacques)

Spotted-necked otters are facing several threats in East Africa to include: habitat loss, pollution, climate change impacts on aquatic ecosystems, fishermen, and potentially an increasing tendency to take them for food.

Overfishing remains the critical threat to otter populations in Africa as fish community structures have been decimated by overfishing nearly everywhere.

## EUROPE

### **Eurasian otter** *Lutra lutra* (submitted by Anna Roos and Andreas Krans)

In Europe *Lutra lutra lutra* is doing better, increasing its range and population density in many areas except for Scotland, Belarus and Georgia. In areas where otters expanded their range in the last two decades fishermen are not prepared for the new competitor and conflicts are growing. In some areas such as Eastern Austria fishermen are in favour of population management. Due to the EU-wide legal status defined in the FFH directive any population management is only possible under very special conditions. Up to now licenses to kill otters have only been issued in Finland. However, there are strong indications that illegal killings of otters by traps and shooting are an increasing threat in many areas.

Otter may cause significant economic damages in traditional aquaculture (fish ponds), but this problem could be solved by fences. Economic damages also occur in trout rivers, partly fostered by stocking hatchery fish. Here, conflict mitigation has to focus on fish management (stocking regime) as fences are not an option.

Huge hydro-electric power stations, planned or currently under construction, are a threat to otters in Georgia, Turkey, and Macedonia.

Very high concentrations of perfluorinated chemicals have been detected in otters from Scandinavia, and the presence of these chemicals appears to be spreading rapidly.

### **Otters in captivity**

The North American river otter is doing well. The other three species being worked with are the Asian short-clawed, Giant, and Spot-necked. The Asian has the most established population but zoos would like to add facilities to increase the numbers for genetic reasons; this is true for the Giant and Spot-necked species as well but their populations are both very low (this is particularly true for the African species). At this time the biggest issue is adding institutions to the list of those working with the latter 3 species, particularly the Spot-necked. The Giant and Spot-necked are listed as Red SSP species which means their populations are not at a genetically viable level, I believe the Asian is a yellow and the North American river otter is a green (good).

The Giant otter is held in captivity in South America, North America, Europe and Singapore. The Giant otter studbook currently lists 122 individuals (66 male, 49 female, 7 unknown) distributed as follows: Europe: 64 (37 male, 23 female, 4 unknown) animals in 17 institutions [includes loan to Singapore]. North America: 31 animals in 7 institutions. The species is breeding well in captivity but new blood lines are needed; the North American population is entirely descended from 6 individuals.