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Editorial

Welcome to the first issue of “Friends of the Giant Otter”! The idea for such a bulletin was first proposed at the 1998 International Symposium for the Conservation of the Giant Otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*), as a means by which all those who are involved with the species are brought together in a cohesive Giant Otter conservation network. In other words, the bulletin is your voice; use it to broadcast or request information, to share news, to advertise, to make contacts, to put forward proposals, opinions, ideas. This first issue, sent to over 100 Giant Otter friends such as yourself, will hopefully stimulate contributions from all over the country and from all sectors. With time, and your help, the “Friends of the Giant Otter” bulletin should evolve into a useful, networking tool, to be published at least twice a year. So please, write soon!

Jessica Groenendijk

(E-mail: fzsgop@terra.com.pe, Tel: 444 9364)

Inside this issue...

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Project updates

Conservation of the Giant Otter in Peru

In 1990, the project “Conservation of the Giant Otter in Peru” was initiated, with the support of the Frankfurt Zoological Society - Help for Threatened Wildlife (FZS). The key objective is to increase knowledge and understanding of these unique animals and to develop a comprehensive plan for their conservation in Peru. Thus far, the majority of the project’s efforts have been focused in the Department of Madre de Dios, but activities will increasingly be carried out further afield.

The project has conducted a Giant Otter census annually in Manu Biosphere Reserve since 1990, with the exceptions of 1997 and 1998. Two censuses were therefore carried out in 1999, in May and October (before and after the dry season respectively during which cubs are born), and a third in May 2000, in order to update the Giant Otter throat pattern database for Manu’s population. Moreover, a gamewarden capacitation course, “Conservation of the Giant Otter in Protected Areas”, was held in Manu in November 1999 at which Tambopata-Candamo Reserved Zone staff were also present. The course highlighted the need for cocha management plans and the considerable enthusiasm, ability, and support of gamewardens in this respect. Also in Manu, an on-going study into the contamination by mercury of four fish

species which feature prominently in the Giant Otter's diet was begun in four key oxbow lakes.

In the past, the project has tended to focus on oxbow lake and large river systems. However, in 1999, a new, long-term branch of research was initiated into Giant Otter group dynamics and habitat use in smaller rivers, namely the Palma Real and Patuyacu watershed, in order to establish the significance of the latter for the survival, and hence conservation, of the species in regions where cochas are few and far between. The first half of 2000 has seen us twice re-visiting the Palma Real to continue research into how Giant Otters live on small rivers.

A draft management plan for Lake Sandoval, produced end-1998, was revised to include more detailed maps and observations made during two 1999 survey visits. In order to stimulate a participative approach and to gain insights from the experience of others, this revised copy was sent to seven NGOs and institutions working in Puerto Maldonado, as well as INRENA (the National Institute for Natural Resources) in Lima, for their comments. In September, all comments received were incorporated into the document and the latter sent to eight tourism companies that operate in the Sandoval area for their contributions. The latter stage is still ongoing and is intended to lead towards a participative implementation of management plan principles, including the construction of a gamewarden post and interpretation centre. Recently, the project was also invited to contribute Giant Otter management ideas for other oxbow lakes in the Tambopata Candamo Reserved Zone and the Manu Biosphere Reserve.

One of the key aims of the project is to highlight those rainforest regions of Peru in which Giant Otters are present and where protection measures should be implemented or improved. Hence, in November 1999, a first investigation of the distribution status of the Giant Otter in the Malinousqui river was carried out; three short surveys were conducted in Lago Valencia in July/August 1999 and in March 2000; and the los Amigos river was censused for the second time, eight years after the first project visit by Christof Schenck and Elke Staib, then project leaders.

Jessica Groenendijk, Frank Hajek
(E-mail: fzsgop@terra.com.pe, Tel: 444 9364)

Distribution and abundance of Giant Otters in the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve

During recent years, there have been sighting reports of Giant Otter groups in the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve (PSNR) in central Peru. In order to confirm this data, the project "Determination of the Distribution and Abundance of the Giant Otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) in the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve" was initiated in June 1999, financed by the Frankfurt Zoological Society – Help for Threatened Wildlife. The key objective is to contribute towards the conservation of this species, by gaining knowledge of the actual population characteristics, habitat conditions and availability, and current threats.

The first fieldwork period, from June to December 1999, has yielded preliminary results. In the Yanayacu and middle Pacaya river basins, several Giant Otter sightings were made with the former watershed being the most important in terms of Giant Otter abundance. However, limited control, lack of tourism infrastructure, gamewarden capacitation or a comprehensive environmental education programme, and increasing pressure exerted by people who enter the Reserve illegally, are all problems which need to be addressed. As a first step, a sensitization programme was initiated with children, fishermen and gamewardens of the Reserve, addressing the importance of species conservation.

Sandra Isola
(E-mail: 19920736@lamolina.edu.pe, Tel: 349 6102)

Studies of Giant Otters in the Candamo Valley, Peru

Conservation International's EISA project (*Evaluation of Social and Environmental Impacts of Petroleum Exploration in Block 78-Tambopata*) has been underway since

September 1996. The goal of this project is two-fold: 1) to evaluate the impacts of hydrocarbon exploration in the headwaters of the Tambopata river in the Tambopata-Candamo Reserved Zone, Peru, and 2) to investigate the ecology and biodiversity of the Candamo River Valley, tributary of the Tambopata and the focus of hydrocarbon exploration during 1996 through 1999.

As part of the EISA project, Conservation International began to evaluate the presence and natural history of Giant Otters in the Candamo Valley. The Giant Otter has been under study in southeastern Peru for more than a decade. Giant Otters are top aquatic predators, and are sensitive to environmental disturbance, making them appropriate indicators of healthy aquatic environments, and validating their inclusion in the impact study.

We carried out three surveys for Giant Otters along the Candamo River and its tributaries (August-September 1997, October 1998, April 1999). Data collected on the otters included location of sign (tracks, scat or communal latrine), and direct observation of animals. Direct observation was difficult because of the fast flowing nature of the streams in this area. We think that at least three groups inhabit the Candamo valley area above the Tavara canyon, though definition of groups was difficult. Groups appear to be smaller than in lowland areas (maximum number of animals seen together was 5), and they may be more fluid, breaking up into subgroups for fishing. No direct impact of the petroleum exploration was found for these otters: exploratory drilling was concentrated in terrestrial habitat at least 1.5 km from the rivers inhabited by Giant Otters. If exploration in the area continues, the greatest risk to otters are from changes in water quality due to waste disposal or spills.

CI plans to continue periodic monitoring of the Giant Otters in the Candamo valley, especially if hydrocarbon exploration continues in the area.

Carol Mitchell

(E-mail: carolm@wayna.rcp.net.pe, ci-pem@terra.com.pe; Tel: 084 572148)

In brief...

Giant Otters on film

During May 2000, a German film crew visited Manu with the aim of filming a documentary on Giant Otter conservation. Based in Cocha Salvador, they were lucky to obtain wonderful otter footage. The head of the park, Ada Castillo, and several Manu gamewardens contributed by respectively highlighting the importance of tourism management in protected areas, and the principle threat in the Giant Otter's past, namely hunting for the pelt trade. Key activities of the FZS Conservation of the Giant Otter project were filmed. It is hoped that the documentary will increase awareness as to the plight of this bioindicator species.

The BBC is also documenting the natural history of the Giant Otter in Manu. It is expected that this film will be broadcast end 2001.

New publications

The September 1998 International Symposium for the Conservation of the Giant Otter, organised by INRENA with the support of FZS, provided an excellent opportunity to share and learn from the work experiences of those involved with Giant Otter investigation and conservation. The publication (in Spanish) of the symposium summary report represents a significant step towards a formulation of the national conservation strategy for this flagship species (please contact INRENA or the Editor if you would like a copy).

Christof Schenck's doctorate thesis, first published in German, has been translated into Spanish, and is entitled "Lobo de Río (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) – Presencia, uso del hábitat y protección en el Perú". Please contact INRENA or the Editor if you would like a copy.

Forthcoming events

The Instituto de Ecología y Evolución de la Facultad de Ciencias de la Universidad Austral de Chile, the IUCN/Species Survival Commission Otter Specialist Group, German Aktion Fischotterschutz and the Comité Nacional Pro Defensa de la Fauna y Flora announce the VIII International Otter Colloquium. The latter will be realised at the Universidad Austral de Chile, Campus Isla Teja in the city of Valdivia, between the 20th and 25th of January, 2001.

Biologists, otter specialists, ecologists and conservationists, wildlife photographers and all friends interested in otters and their environment world-wide are invited to participate and contribute to the plenary sessions and workshops. The arrival date is the 19th of January while that for departure, also to post colloquium tours, is the 26th. To register or for further information, try visiting the colloquium web-site (www.ottercolloquium.cl) or contact Gonzalo Medina, the colloquium organiser (gmedina@uach.cl).

The participation fee is US \$100 for developing countries and for students with ID, or US \$350 for people from developed countries (not including flight, hotel or post-colloquium tour costs). It would be good to see a large Peruvian contingent participate in the colloquium. Does anybody have any ideas for funding to help cover some of the costs for those who wish to do so?

Pepe's paragraph

“Hi there! Let me introduce myself to you, my new friends. My name's Pepe. I live on the Manu river; maybe some of you have already met me there. When I was invited to contribute to this bulletin, I thought, 'Why not? I love to talk about myself!' Did you know, for instance, that in 1999, we were classified as 'endangered' by the IUCN Otter Specialist Group as well as by Peruvian Supreme Decree 013-99-AG? Also, we have been listed since 1973 under Appendix I (species threatened with extinction) of CITES. I don't know what all those numbers mean but I do know that there aren't many of us left and that makes us special. Well, that's my pearl of wisdom for this issue. Keep your eyes open for the next one! Ciao!”



Pepe

Notice board

- * Concise opinions on the contents of this bulletin are always welcome and will be published under “Points of view” in the next issue.
- * The FZS Conservation of the Giant Otter project is very interested in any reports of Giant Otter sightings throughout Peru (please contact the Editor). With your assistance, key study areas for existing or future projects will be determined. Your help would therefore be much appreciated!
- * Do you think this bulletin should address not only the Giant Otter but also the remaining Peruvian otter species, the Marine Otter (*Lontra felina*) and the Neotropical Otter (*Lontra longicaudis*)? Replies to the Editor please!

Comments and written contributions are gratefully received. Please send them to: **The Editor, Friends of the Giant Otter, Aurelio Fernandez Concha 675, El Rosedal, Lima 18** or to fzsgop@terra.com.pe. If you wish your name to be removed from the mailing list, or if your address changes, please notify the Editor.
