

FRIENDS of the Giant Otter

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Editorial

Many thanks to those of you who contributed to this, the second issue of “Friends of the Giant Otter”. Please continue to do so! It is heartening to read of so much interest and concern for the species, of projects that are ending being replaced by others, each leading to yet a new insight into the lives of these charismatic animals. Let’s hope that in 2001 Giant Otters will continue to benefit from your efforts. We wish you every success and a Happy New Year!

Jessica Groenendijk

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Inside this issue...

- *Project updates* – How are Giant Otter projects currently underway progressing?
- *Zoo special* – What is happening with Giant Otters in zoos?
- *New publications* – The latest publications relevant to Giant Otter conservation.
- *Forthcoming events* – Don’t miss out. Be there!
- *Pepe’s paragraph* – What you didn’t know about Giant Otters... Pepe reveals all!
- *Notice board* – Pin your notices up here.

Project updates

Giant Otters and monitoring in cocha Tres Chimbadas, Tambopata

The Tambopata river in Madre de Dios currently finds itself under the scrutiny of various tourism companies which already own or are planning to construct a lodge in the area. The Posada Amazonas Lodge, belonging to the native community of Infierno and the tourism company Rainforest Expeditions, collected data during 2000 within the context of a medium-term monitoring plan to evaluate the status of the Giant Otter on the lake of Tres Chimbadas. One of the principle objectives of this study is to determine the type of influence exerted by human presence, namely tourist groups, on a family of Giant Otters. Levels of tourism are increasing year by year, and a management plan will need to be developed in the near future.

The Yacu family comprises 10 individuals; an average of two cubs survived each of the last three breeding seasons. Lake Tres Chimbadas is roughly 2km in length and is relatively easily accessed, following a walk of about 30 minutes from the Tambopata river.

Preliminary findings indicate that the strategy adopted by Posada Amazonas Lodge, of regularly following a fixed circuit, in a single catamaran, and entering only half of the lake (as advised by C. Schenck and the Giant Otter Project of the Frankfurt Zoological Society), has had favourable results when considering monthly sightings of the Giant Otters. About 80% of tourist groups that visited the lake during 2000, observed the Yacu family. Moreover, thanks to the emphasis placed by Rainforest Expedition guides on appropriate observation behaviour, such as maintaining silence and avoiding unnecessary movements on the catamaran while in the vicinity of the otters, the characteristic alarm vocalisations have reduced markedly.

The relationship between conservation of the species versus customer satisfaction, as combined within the study, leads to a balance which maximises management efficiency and visitor commitment towards the conservation of the species.

Patricia Herrera C.

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Conservation of the Giant Otter in Peru

With the aim of expanding upon the data for the national Giant Otter distribution map (see Issue No.1, July 2000), and also by request of INRENA, the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project investigated the Lagartococha river within the recently created Gueppi Reserved Zone, northern Peru. The Lagartococha forms part of the border with Ecuador and is remarkable in that it is connected to over 30 lakes that are for the large part directly accessible by boat. It would appear to be a prime environment for Giant Otters and was, in fact, inhabited by the species well into the 1980's. However, although Neotropical Otters were sighted twice, no evidence was found to suggest that the Giant Otter persisted in the area. Talking to local people revealed only that the Giant Otter is frequently confused with its smaller cousin; when we mentioned the typical white neck markings it became clear that nobody remembered ever seeing one.

Not giving up hope, we ventured up the Quebrada Aoshiri, a tributary of the Napo river where, somebody had heard, a Giant Otter had been killed in 1999. After almost two days of travel, very fresh dens and campsites were finally encountered, and when we again conversed with the local people, they told us that they meet the 'sea wolves' occasionally. We ourselves did not actually see Giant Otters but there is no doubt that a few groups still remain in the remotest areas of northern Peru.

Since July, in addition to a second Manu census, we also re-visited the Palma Real area and are beginning to become familiar with the groups of Giant Otters that inhabit this small-river system. Roberto Quispe, a Peruvian biologist who carried out his thesis on the diet of the Giant Otter in the Palma Real, is on the verge of completing his work and will be presenting the key results at the upcoming VIII International Otter Colloquium.

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Study of the distribution and abundance of the Giant Otter in the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve, Iquitos*

The objectives of this study were to elaborate a potential habitat map, to determine the presence of the species in different sectors of the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve, to characterize the family groups, to identify the actual and potential threats, and to initiate an awareness raising program among the local population about the importance of conserving the Giant Otter.

The fieldwork was carried out in two stages: the first between June and December 1999, in the basins of the rivers Pucate, Yanayacu de Pucate, Pacaya, Ucayali and the Puinahua Channel; and the second between May and July 2000, in the Samiria river basin.

Giant Otter sightings in the Pacaya river were concentrated in the middle of the basin, between Yarina and Cahuana guard posts. There were more sightings dispersed in the Yanayacu river basin, between Lake El Dorado and the community of Yarina. In the Samiria river basin, only one old marking zone was identified in the Yanayacu Grande Creek, close to campsites abandoned by illegal resource users. Park guards have reported some sightings on the Samiria river basin during the fieldwork period. In the Ucayali river basin, evidence of the presence of Giant Otters was obtained only in Cocha Charapillo, close to the community of Juancito. Although local people have reported sightings of otters, we were only able to locate one "campsite" in this area.

Tourism without control, illegal resource users, lack of infrastructure, diseases, the harvest of arahuana fry and the harvest of taricaya and charapa were detected as the most important threats for Giant Otter conservation. It should be pointed out that the sector evaluated includes relatively few communities located within the National Reserve, namely Manco Cápac (Pacaya), Victoria (Puinahua) and Dos de Mayo (Samiria). However, communities on the periphery and/or in the buffer zone of the National Reserve are no less important. All should be included in awareness-raising programmes, since in the final analysis all communities, both within and outside the National Reserve, make use of the resources it contains.

* This study was financed by the Frankfurt Zoological Society, in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund, Pro Naturaleza – Peruvian Foundation for the Conservation of Nature, and the Conservation Data Center of the La Molina National Agrarian University.

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Giant Otter feeding ecology to be studied in Cocha Cashu

A new study on Giant Otter feeding ecology and predator/prey interactions is starting up at the Estacion Biologica Cocha Cashu (EBCC) in Manu National Park. The project aims to fill gaps in the

knowledge about Giant Otter feeding ecology in Manu's oxbow lakes by (1) better describing lake microhabitats, and the changes in otter feeding behavior and hunting success with respect to these microhabitats; (2) conducting long-term monitoring of fish populations that are heavily used by otters; and (3) trying to understand the predator/prey interactions between Giant Otters and their prey (i.e. "top-down" vs. "bottom-up" effects).

The project will be conducted over the next 5-10 years and forms the basis of a PhD thesis for the project's primary instigator, Lisa Davenport. Lisa is collaborating on the project with Blgo. Ciprian Aguirre, the former head of Fisheries in Puerto Maldonado. Ciprian has a long history of working with both wild and captive fish from the area, including long-term research on "boca-chico" a favoured fish of both otters and humans.

The feeding ecology study is only in its early stages. This past fall, Lisa and Ciprian attempted to begin studying fish populations using electrofishing techniques, but due to equipment failure were only able to collect very preliminary data on relative fish abundances. Instead, they concentrated on mapping Cocha Cashu and neighbouring Cocha Totoro, and experimenting with different tagging methods for their larger catch-release studies of boca-chico and bujurki. They hope to return in early summer of 2001 to begin intensive data collection of fish populations and otter feeding behaviour in different lake habitats.

Lisa Clare Davenport

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Zoo special

Giant Otters in Zoos

Giant otters (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) in zoos can play an important role in raising public awareness about this endangered species and its habitat. Some studies on captive giant otters have contributed to overall knowledge and conservation /management strategies for this species in the wild. Unfortunately, to date, little information on giant otter captive husbandry and management has been published, studied, maintained, or shared among zoos. In addition, there is a lack of cooperation between institutions holding giant otters. As a result, problems exist such as high cub mortality rates, small populations, diseases, inbreeding, and potential breeding otters being held singly or in single sex groups. These problems must be resolved to help create self-sustaining captive *P. brasiliensis* populations. A resolution may not only benefit giant otters in captivity, but may also help conservation efforts for these endangered otters in the wild. The completion of a proposed international giant otter studbook and participation of all zoos holding this species is urgently needed to address and help rectify these problems.

There are approximately 40 giant otters held in South American zoos and only 9 outside South America. Each year some South American zoos receive confiscated giant otter cubs from the wild. These cubs are usually in poor physical condition because inexperienced people previously held them as pets. Unfortunately, many of these cubs die. Giant otters should never be taken from their natural habitat to be kept as pets! Moreover, it is vitally necessary that zoos cooperate to create a self-sustaining captive population rather than relying on obtaining wild giant otters. The diminishing population can not afford such losses in addition to the many other dangers they already face.

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Interview with Hugo Galvez, veterinary surgeon at Quistococha Zoo, Iquitos

"There are currently four Giant Otters in Quistococha Zoo and all were confiscated within the last decade from local people who captured or bought them as young animals to keep as pets. One, a cub of about four months old, was confiscated only a few weeks ago. Nobody knows where he came from originally. I believe the zoo in Pucallpa also holds two adult specimens. Trade in endangered species, such as the Giant Otter, should be treated the same as trade in drugs or arms; there should be greater awareness, and stricter controls. It would be interesting to involve the captive Giant Otters in the zoos of Iquitos and Pucallpa in a joint environmental education programme, highlighting the protected status of the species and urging people not to hunt or capture Giant Otters".

Hugo Galvez

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New publications

“Help Protect the Jungle Giant– Giant Otters, A Unique and Endangered Mammal...” – Groenendijk & Hajek, 2000. This is a leaflet which was produced in September to aid tourists and local people in getting to know the Giant Otter, and to incentivate appropriate behaviour when visiting areas inhabited by the species. Currently, 15,000 copies of the leaflet are being distributed in protected areas. For copies, contact: fzsgop@terra.com.pe

Forthcoming events

For those of you who missed the last issue, the VIII International Otter Colloquium will be realised at the Universidad Austral de Chile, Campus Isla Teja in the city of Valdivia, between the 20th and 27th of January, 2001. This is a unique opportunity for biologists, otter specialists, ecologists and conservationists, wildlife photographers and all friends interested in otters and their environment worldwide. To register, or for further information about costs or contributing to the Plenary or poster sessions, try visiting the colloquium web-site (www.ottercolloquium.cl) or contact Gonzalo Medina, the colloquium organiser (gmedina@uach.cl). So far, six people working with Giant Otters in Peru will be there!

The Manu Biosphere Reserve Headquarters is organising a meeting on the 30th of January in Cuzco to propose and discuss low impact nature tourism alternatives for oxbow lakes with special emphasis on the Giant Otter. For more information, please contact pqnmanu@terra.com.pe or tel: 084 24 0898.

Pepe's paragraph

Hello again, my friends! Big news! I am now in the company of a lovely female otter, from Cocha Salvador. We live together on the Manu river and, boy, do we eat well! I think I must be the fattest otter here! Anyway, I'm getting side-tracked. You guys all know that I'm the relaxed type, but my lady companion is a little more sensitive. She complains that when she's trying to tell you that you are coming too close (that's what brrrr, brrrr! sound means, by the way!) you believe that she is tame and you come even closer. Please, the next time you see one of us rise straight out of the water, showing our necks and chests, while shouting brrrr, brrrr! it means that we're a bit alarmed by you and that we'd appreciate it if you moved away a little to give us some space. Otherwise my lady friend might leave me, and wouldn't that be awful?! Thanks in advance, and until the next time!



Pepe

Notice board

* A few people have contacted the editor with information about the marine otter (*Lontra felina*) and the neotropical otter (*Lontra longicaudis*). Please continue! Maybe these two species can also be addressed by the bulletin in the future...

* 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!

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.

