

FRIENDS of the Giant Otter

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Editorial

We are already midway 2001, and as you will see in this extra long issue of our bulletin, much has happened since you last heard from our Giant Otter friends. The VIIIth International Otter Colloquium in Valdivia, Chile, started the year with a bang; we should all work together towards realising the recommendations which resulted. Furthermore, it was decided that this bulletin should cover Giant Otter issues not only within Peru but throughout Latin America; thus you will find project reports from Suriname and Colombia. A Giant Otter website will soon be on the internet, two brand new publications are for sale, both with important implications for Giant Otters in the wild and in captivity, and we have two exciting events to look forward to. Finally and most importantly, Giant Otters in Peru are hopefully now busy raising their cubs; Pepe asks for our cooperation during this critical period.

Jessica Groenendijk

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Project updates

Kaburi Creek to become a nature reserve in Suriname

Kaburi Creek, where the first study of Giant Otters was carried out in Suriname, may soon become a Nature Reserve. Considered 'a biodiversity jewel of Suriname' and a precious asset of its natural heritage, STINASU, Suriname's Nature Conservation Foundation launched the effort to make it a Reserve 23 years ago. However recent studies reveal that while Giant Otters still use the creek regularly and breed there every year, human encroachment by the local Indians has increased significantly in the past two years. Already the otters have abandoned their campsites along the first 3km of the creek where human disturbance is greatest. For instance, both the Indians and the otters use the same floating grass beds as preferred fishing areas along the creek. Sooner or later there will be an imbalance when the otters will not be able to find suitable campsites in key habitat areas of the creek as humans

take them over one by one for their own use. Activities include fishing, hunting, logging, permanent and temporary human camps with large kitchen gardens and the capture of wildlife such as parrots.

A new study of the Giant Otters in the creek was initiated in September 2000. Our results this year show that the otters are still using the same areas they were using on the upstream portions of Kaburi during 1976-1978. All sites have been marked and will also be monitored during the next dry season from September to March. Two researchers will be stationed in the creek from September 15 to December 15, 2001 (and also in 2002 if funding from the Oceanic Society continues) to ensure that the otters are protected during the breeding season. A full copy of our first report can be e-mailed on request.

Nicole Duplaix
(E-mail: NDParis@aol.com)

Giant Otter diet in the Palma Real river, Tambopata National Reserve, Peru

I am a student of San Marcos university, and am concluding my BSc thesis "Determination of the diet of the Giant Otter by means of analysis of hard parts present in spraints collected in the Palma Real watershed, Madre de Dios, Peru". This project was carried out in collaboration with the San Marcos Natural History Museum, Lima, and the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project. No less than 66 fish taxa have been recorded; knowledge of the habits of many of the fish species and genera confirms that the Giant Otter prefers to hunt in slow-flowing waters, with bank vegetation. Seasonality differences were observed in the diet, as well as differences with Giant Otter diet in lotic habitats (lakes). This work is a contribution towards increasing basic biological knowledge of the Giant Otter, and hopefully towards conservation of the species. My thesis will be published in July.

Roberto Quispe
(E-mail: rquispe91@hotmail.com; Tel: 425 2642)

Giant Otter monitoring in Cocococha ox-bow lake, Tambopata national Reserve, Peru

"Since January 2001, I have been working as a Resident Naturalist - part time guide, part time 'scientist' - at the Explorer's Inn lodge (EI), on the Tambopata River. I arrived already with an interest in Giant Otters and I soon realized that there was a need to gather more information about this species on Cocococha lake which is visited by every EI tourist group. I was lucky enough to see four Giants during my first excursion on the lake. The group periscoped and barked around our boat as we toured the shores accompanied by birdwatchers. From then on, I began to record all visits to any site near EI with possible Giant Otter presence. I collected data such as Giant Otter movements, behaviour, times, distances and any negative impacts, and also compiled 15 years of sightings records from EI log books.

To each group of tourists, I began to propose a different type of visit to the 'Giant Otter's Home'. This meant silence, respect and patience. We would hide on a boat by the shore vegetation and wait for at least one hour. We were rewarded by the best sightings ever, of natural behaviour, sometimes very close, without the otters noticing our presence. No more quick alarm; instead, we watched them fishing, playing, eating or just passing by. All tourists were of course so pleased and the otters were at peace... From this obvious and dramatic behaviour change, we could confirm that boats in the middle of the lake were a disturbance.

A management plan for Cocococha lake is on its way. We changed the tourism package so that guests are informed about the Giant Otter before going on the lake; a talk is now given to each group. No boats are going around the lake any more and excursions are limited to a short littoral distance. Most important of all, we are all working hard on the construction of a hide, which will further reduce the impact of tourists, boats and noise. Maybe we'll even witness a successful reproduction from this hide. As I'm about to go back to Europe, I know that Cocococha's otters will enjoy Home and that they will open visitors' eyes to nature's wonders. I'm looking forward to hearing about the cubs..."

Raphael Notin

(E-mail: notin@hotmail.com)

Recent records of the distribution of *Pteronura brasiliensis* in Colombia

Said to occur in the Orinoco and Amazonas watersheds, Colombia, in actual fact little is known about the distribution of the Giant Otter in the country, or if populations are recovering since 1973 when hunting for the pelt trade was prohibited. Within the context of further defining distribution as well as the current status of the species, the project "Population aspects of the Giant Otter in a sector of the department of Casanare, Colombia" has been proposed; the first phase, obtaining funding, is underway. Preliminary data on the presence of the species in this region was gathered during March 1999. Two solitary individuals were observed as well as a family of eight, including two cubs. Six individuals were identified with the aid of a video camera. Until now, these are the only existing records of the species in the region.

Javier Diaz

(E-mail: javdiaz@ap.com.co)

Colloquium report

The VIIIth International Otter Colloquium, held in Valdivia, Chile, between 19 and 27 January, 2001, proved to be a great opportunity to present research results and to meet and establish contacts with many otter enthusiasts from around the world, especially people interested in or working with Latin American otter species. More than 60 otter specialists from 24 countries participated. One of the main highlights was a day field trip to a marine otter (*Lontra felina*) habitat where many of us had the good fortune to observe these lovely animals hunting amongst the waves.

The 'latinos' had several very productive (and very late!) discussions, which led to recommendations for the continent and for its four otter species. For the Giant Otter it was recommended: (1) to capacitate surveyors and then conduct surveys to fill in information gaps on the distribution of the species; (2) to conduct long-term research and conservation projects in four habitat types – fast flowing, montane forest rivers, seasonally flooded savanna, lowland rivers with large oxbow lake complexes, and seasonally flooded forest; (3) to evaluate the threats to otters from mercury pollution using non-invasive methodologies; (4) to understand the influence of conservation / development mechanisms (eg. nature tourism, the provision of environmental services by forests and the implementation of protected areas) on the conservation of the species and to develop strategies by which the Giant Otter can act as a flagship, umbrella or indicator species within these mechanisms; and (5) to conduct studies on predator-prey relations including the human aspects of this issue.

Below is a list of members of the IUCN / Species Survival Commission Otter Specialist Group (OSG) which are of particular relevance to anybody involved with otters in Latin America; a list of the Country Representatives may be obtained by contacting the editor.

Chairman of the OSG: Mr. Claus Reuther
E-mail: Aktion.Fischotterschutz@t-online.de

Continental Coordinator for Latin America: Dr. Gonzalo Medina
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Species Representatives: Neotropical Otter (*Lontra longicaudis*)- Ms. Helen Waldemarin
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Giant Otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*)- Mrs. Jessica Groenendijk
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Southern River Otter (*Lontra provocax*)- Mr. Claudio Chehebar
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Marine Otter (*Lontra felina*)- Mr. Claudio Delgado
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In brief...

Giant Otter website

The Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project is in the process of constructing a web site, www.giantotters.com. Although focusing on project activities, the site will provide general information about Giant Otters and their conservation throughout South America. Managed by Frank Hajek (fzsgop@terra.com.pe), it will be accessible by the end of May this year although text is still missing in some sections and improvements will be made in the long-term (whenever Frank is not in the field!). We invite you to have a look at it; comments are very welcome, especially with respect to content, navigation within the site and readability.

Standardising Giant Otter survey methodologies

The need for standardisation of otter survey techniques – collecting, analysing and maintaining data obtained through otter surveys – was much emphasised during the VIII International Otter Colloquium. A Standard Method has been developed for surveying and monitoring distribution and population trends of the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) and operational guidelines are currently being updated. Giant otters, endemic to the rainforests and wetlands of South America, inhabit slow-moving rivers and streams, as well as lakes, swamps, marshes, and flooded forest during the rainy season. It is the giant otter's range and the diversity of its habitats which will no doubt create obstacles when determining a standard survey methodology for the species. However, this should be seen as a challenge to be resolved rather than a reason not to proceed. The first step is an evaluation of current methods which are in use throughout the species' range. In order to contribute to the process, and in the hope that other projects in other countries will do likewise, the Giant Otter Project of the Frankfurt Zoological Society is currently preparing a paper which will describe in detail the methodologies used in Peru. The paper will be reviewed first by members of the IUCN Otter Specialist Group and will subsequently be circulated amongst people with previous experience in conducting Giant Otter surveys in other South American countries.

New publications

The much anticipated booklet “**Husbandry and Management of the Giant Otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*)**” by Sheila Sykes-Gatz is now for sale. Intended for use in the proposed international Giant Otter studbook, it is hoped this paper will stimulate communication and information sharing among all institutions holding Giant Otters in captivity, and help provide information and guidance for the husbandry and management of the species. Topics discussed include: an international historical overview of Giant Otters in captivity, breeding and rearing success, zoo population census summary, international studbook needs and population management recommendations, husbandry and management topics, enclosure and housing recommendations, enrichment and training, otter introduction methods, diets and feeding, emphasis and study on techniques needed to promote successful cub-rearing, etc.. This booklet can be ordered, for around 7 US\$ + shipping costs, by contacting the publisher at: Dr. Klaus Schüling, Schüling Buchkurier, Falkenhorst 4, 48155 Münster, Germany, Tel: +49 251/31 1523, Fax: +49 251/ 31 1524, E-mail: schueling@tiergarten.com.

Sheila Sykes-Gatz is a member of the staff of Dortmund Zoo, Germany, as well as of the Otters in Captivity Task Force of the IUCN / SSC Otter Specialist Group. If you have interest in the proposed formation of the international Giant Otter studbook, or if you would like any additional information, not presented within the scope of the booklet (eg. hand-rearing techniques for cubs, reproductive information, etc.), please contact Sheila at sheilasykes@hotmail.com

Education and awareness activities are significant components of any otter conservation programme. To this effect, the Otter Research Group Japan, in collaboration with the IUCN / SSC Otter Specialist Group, have produced a manual entitled “**The Wetlands Ambassador – Education and Public Awareness Methodologies for Otter Conservation**” which is designed as an introduction to ‘who is doing what’. Edited by Motokazu Ando and Hiroshi Sasaki, the book presents case studies from all over the world, regardless of their scale (national campaign v. personal effort) or budget (costly v. low-tech), and is targeted particularly at zoo staff, conservation NGOs (especially those involved with wetlands conservation), school teachers and administration. “The Wetlands Ambassador” is now available at a cost of 10 US\$ + postage costs. For details, please contact: Dr. Hiroshi Sasaki, Secretary-General, Otter Research Group Japan, c/o Chikushi Jogakuen Junior College, 2-12-1 Ishizaka, Dazaifu 818-0118 Japan, Tel: +81 92 925 3511, Fax: +81 92 928 6253, E-mail: hsasaki@chikushi-u.ac.jp.

Forthcoming events

Between the 4th and 7th of June, 2001, an International Symposium will be held in Puerto Maldonado, entitled “**Experiencias de Investigacion y Manejo de Bosques Neotropicales**”. Organised by Pro-Manu (a project of the Peruvian government and the European Union), the main objective of this promising event is to unite specialists in investigation and resource management working in the Manu Biosphere Reserve as well as in other similar areas, to exchange experiences and to recount how their work can contribute to

the development and management of protected areas in particular, and of tropical forests in general. Two presentations focusing on the Giant Otter will be given. For more information, check out www.promanu.org/symposium.

“The Fifth International Conference on Wildlife Management in Amazonia and Latin America” will be held at Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, between 10 and 14 September, 2001. The central objective is to discuss and divulge current advances in wildlife management in Latin America, having as main subject the definition and evaluation of sustainability criteria. Contact quintocongreso@internodos.com for more information.

Pepe's paragraph

Buenos dias! How are my friends today? The rainy season is just about ending in this corner of the world; now comes the time when we otters start to think more about raising little ones, and less about food! Our cubs are born sometimes as early as April, but usually during May, June, July, even in August. They stay in the den for about three weeks, then we introduce them to the water. They don't like swimming much at first; we have to teach them that that's what being an otter means! The little ones only hunt and travel with the rest of us when they are about four months old. So up until this stage, they are extremely vulnerable to disturbance of any kind. I would like to ask you to please be extra careful during these months, not to get too close to our dens, and to watch us from a distance so that we can feed our cubs without interruption. I know you will understand!! Ciao and take care!

Pepe



Notice board

- **Die Wölfe des Rio Manu – Riesenotter in Peru**, a German Giant Otter documentary filmed in the Manu Reserved Zone during May 2000 and in which the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project collaborated, is due to be shown on the German TV channel ARD, Thursday 5 July 2001, at 20:15.
- Please contact the editor for a complete e-mail copy of the results and recommendations of the VIIIth International Otter Colloquium.

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.

