

# ***FRIENDS of the Giant Otter***

No.4 / JANUARY 2002



## ***Editorial***

After the bumper issue in June last year, I am happy to see yet more contributions from countries in the giant otter's range as far as French Guiana and Brazil, in addition to the regular articles from Peru. In future, the bulletin will no longer be bi-annual, but will be produced three times a year, in order to continue to reflect all that is happening in the eventful giant otter world. For instance, it is particularly exciting to hear about plans for a major giant otter conservation project in the Guiana Shield countries, and I welcome Marc's account of his survey of the Purús river, together with his son. It is findings such as theirs that lead to further conservation efforts in new areas. Happy reading and I hope you'll enjoy a peaceful and productive 2002!

Jessica Groenendijk  
(E-mail: [fzsgop@terra.com.pe](mailto:fzsgop@terra.com.pe))

## ***Inside this issue...***

- *Project updates* – How are current giant otter projects progressing and what's new?
- *In brief...* - Recent news items outlined.
- *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 Otter conservation workshop report, Puerto Maldonado, Peru**

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of December, a one-day course/workshop "Research and Conservation of the Giant Otter and Ox-bow lakes in the Madre de Dios region" was given and facilitated by Jessica Groenendijk and Frank Hajek, of the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project. The aim of this event was to bring together representatives of the protected areas authority – INRENA, local authorities and NGO's -, and nature tourism companies in order to share research findings and work towards a variety of ox-bow lake management models for the area.

After an introduction, the course began with a slide presentation summarising the biology and ecology of the giant otter, with special emphasis on the Madre de Dios population. This was followed by a 45-minute video "The Wolves of the Manu River – Giant Otters". A presentation focusing on the threats to the species and its environment, especially alluvial gold mining and associated mercury use, came next. The last presentation before lunch dealt with nature tourism management in giant otter habitats and how to make this

economic activity a tool for conservation rather than an additional threat. After lunch participants were separated into groups and presented with three hypothetical ox-bow lakes. Each lake had a different set of biotic and abiotic characteristics and human use patterns. Using the information provided at the course, as well as their varied personal experiences and work backgrounds, each group had to discuss, agree and present a management plan for each lake, which would harmonise human activities and giant otter conservation.

The management ideas and plans presented are too varied to be described here. However, certain general learning points are worth emphasising: a multidisciplinary approach results in more thorough management proposals, and indirect effects of human activities often have a deeper impact on conservation than direct impacts. Electronic versions of the course materials are available upon request.

**Frank Hajek**  
(E-mail: [fzsgop@terra.com.pe](mailto:fzsgop@terra.com.pe))

### **Tourism management plan for Lake Cocococha, Tambopata, Peru**

During 2001, Explorer's Inn has been dedicated to the implementation of a tourism management plan for lake Cocococha, with advice from the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project. As part of the tourist package offered at EI, all tourist groups visit Cocococha, and are given a small tour of the lake in catamarans. All giant otter sightings have been recorded in detail since January 2001 when Raphael Notin (a previous Resident Naturalist) began monitoring the behaviour of the otters with every visit to the lake. Four otters were seen regularly, although the boat route taken at the time appeared to cause an element of disturbance - the sightings were generally short-lived and alarm behaviour (periscoping and snorting) was often observed.

The change in the approach to giant otter conservation at EI began after a tense few weeks of no sightings (March 2001). By May, management of tourism in the lake was underway and all guides and tourists were (and are still being) educated on the importance of protecting the giant otters. In May, not only were all four otters sighted, but there was also an addition to the family – two cubs of approximately three months old! The tour of the lake was altered to encompass less than a quarter of its surface area and the time spent in the catamarans was reduced, through the use of an informal fallen palm hide. By ensuring the same boat route was used, the otters were able to gradually adjust to tourism activity and by June, a change in behaviour was evident - not only had the length of observations increased (up to 3 hours in one case), but alarm behaviour was displayed much less often. Instead, the otters were seen playing, fishing and resting out of the water, on logs.

However, the management plan was not yet complete. Since the cubs were still young, the construction of a proper hide (a fixed observation point to which otters become more easily accustomed) was postponed. In November 2001, after two weeks of planning and hard labour, a discrete but effective hide materialized. The location is such that it gives a complete view of the lake, and an educational exhibition inside informs tourists of the common species of birds and animals seen at Cocococha. The tourists are able to experience ecotourism and leave with a better idea of what conservation is really about.

What made all the hard work well worth it, was when the giant otters were sighted as the last nail went in...

**Nicole Antonie**  
(E-mail: [nicolle\\_antonie@yahoo.com](mailto:nicolle_antonie@yahoo.com))

### **The Giant Otter in the Yavarí Mirí watershed, Iquitos, Perú**

The watershed of the Yavarí Mirí River is located in the department of Loreto, northeastern Peru; the upper section borders the southeastern limit of the Tamshiyacu Tahuayo Comunal Reserve where the highest mammal diversity in the world has been registered.

The project “The Giant Otter: A Flagship Species for the Tamshiyacu Tahuayo Comunal Reserve”, carried out between April and June 2001, had as its objective to determine the distribution and abundance of the giant otter in the Yavarí Mirí basin. The latter may be acting as a source for the repopulation of giant otters within the Comunal Reserve and its surrounds, which is why it was important not only to establish the species’ presence in the area but also to involve the local settlements in conservation and management initiatives.

Despite the fact that heavy rains and the high water level complicated fieldwork, it proved possible to ascertain the presence of giant otters through direct sightings as well as indirect signs of activity. Moreover, threats to the species were identified including commercial fishing, habitat destruction and hunting. Conversations were held with people from the area about the biology of the giant otter and the importance of the species, and information leaflets and posters produced by the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project were distributed.

The project received financial and/or logistical support from the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Rainforest Conservation Fund (RCF), Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology (DICE) and the Centro de Datos para la Conservación – Universidad Nacional Agraria La Molina (CDC-UNALM).

**Sandra Isola Elias**  
(E-mail: [sisola@lamolina.edu.pe](mailto:sisola@lamolina.edu.pe))

### **Giant Otter Conservation Project to be launched in the Guianas**

A 3-year Giant Otter Regional Conservation effort will start in the three Guianas (Suriname, French Guiana, Guyana) in early 2002. The Guayana Shield region is one of the largest, still pristine, continuous tropical rainforest complexes in the world, a biodiversity "hot spot". Suriname, a conservation leader in the region, has protected 10% of the country in parks and reserves. However, today, the Guianas not only share irreplaceable natural resources, but also face a series of critical development and environmental issues, which must be resolved to support their goals for sustainable development. Governments face increasing pressure for the exploitation of their countries’ natural resources for short-term benefits. Multinational conglomerates, specifically logging, petrochemical and mining companies, are multiplying their efforts to take advantage of the economic crisis for favourable exploitation contracts.

Giant otters have the potential of rapidly disappearing from even the remote river systems in the Guianas due to their sensitivity to sustained local human disturbance and their suspected vulnerability to mercury accumulation resulting from an explosion of small-scale gold mining activities – as such they are excellent “bio-indicators”. This charismatic, endangered species will be the catalyst to spearhead conservation awareness and public education programmes, and to promote actions to protect key threatened freshwater biomes in the Guianas region.

The Program of activities will build on the ongoing WWF-GFECF partnership in the Guianas over a three-year period together with governments, private sectors, non-governmental organizations, and local stakeholders. The project strategy covers five areas:

- Conduct giant otter and freshwater species assessment, inventory and monitoring both in watersheds where gold mining occurs, and in others so far untouched via field expeditions and/or aerial surveys,
- Map toxic threats to water quality (and freshwater biodiversity) associated with gold mining based on available data,
- Identify and map potential Key Giant Otter Areas in the three Guianas based on field/aerial surveys and available data,
- Support the establishment of Key Giant Otter Areas as part of the National Reserves system and
- Promote giant otter conservation education and capacity building in the public sector.

Most of the funding has been secured for the first year at least. Funding sources include World Wildlife Fund - Guianas, World Wildlife Fund – USA, National Geographic Society, and the Oceanic Society.

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

### **Giant otters in French Guiana – a preliminary report**

The Guianas together are thought to be one of the last strongholds of the giant otter but, until recently, virtually no information was available on this species in French Guiana, a French department situated adjacent to Suriname and north of Brazil.

KWATA NGO (Etude et Conservation de la faune de Guyane) and SFPEM (Société Française pour l'Etude et la Protection des Mammifères) funded by DIREN (Ministère de l'Environnement) and CEPA (Conservation des Espèces et Populations Animales) have started a project aimed at:

- surveying the country in order to assess the distribution and status of the species;
- supporting the education of local people about otters as flagship species;
- assessing possibilities for development of responsible ecotourism;
- assessing the impact of man-imposed threats to the species and opportunities for minimizing these threats.

The first survey started in January 2000, consisting of interviews of local people and all river-course users (hunters, tourism guides, etc.). Our preliminary results suggest that the giant otter is widespread throughout the country, with more than 100 data supporting this.

Between 3 and 14 October 2000 (dry season), we actively searched for giant otters along the Litani River which forms the southern part of the frontier with Suriname. We observed giant otters at four locations, as well as four sprainting sites along 200 kilometres. Between 19 and 30 September 2001, we investigated the Sinnamary River and from 2 to 7 October 2001 the Arataï river was explored, both rivers being situated in the centre of the country. We saw giant otters on the Arataï and found tracks on both rivers. A large campsite was also encountered at the point where the Arataï merges with the Approuague River.

Only approximately 150,000 inhabitants populate the 90,000 km<sup>2</sup> of French Guiana, mainly in the coastal zone. Nonetheless, the country is currently facing a dramatic demographic pressure. In the coastal area, threats to the giant otter are indirect and include hunting, fishing, and tourism activities. The resulting disturbance may locally affect giant otter populations (distribution, abundance, ecology). Legal and illegal gold mining is the greatest threat in the south of the country. In addition to the impact of associated human activities (colonisation, hunting), gold dredging results in large amounts of suspended particulate matter in watercourses which reduce light penetration and affect fish respiratory systems. Moreover, about 2 tonnes of the mercury used to amalgamate gold is lost in the environment every year in French Guiana and may also affect some physiological functions of otters. On the other hand, the deforestation rate is very slow and geographically limited, and logging activities do not affect riparian habitats.

**Helene Jacques**

(E-mail: [h.jacques.otter@wanadoo.fr](mailto:h.jacques.otter@wanadoo.fr))

### **A new project on giant otters to be carried out in the Amazon Basin, Brazil**

The main focus of the “Giant Otter Amazon Project – Biology and Ecology of *Pteronura brasiliensis* in the Reserve Xixuau” is to gather information on the species that may be useful to its conservation and management.

We chose to study the giant otter in a very remote and unspoiled area with low anthropogenic pressure. The Xixuau Reserve is situated 500 km north of Manaus along the Rio Jauaperi, a tributary of the Rio Negro which marks the border between the Brazilian states of Amazonas and Roraima. The Associação Amazônia, a Brazilian NGO, established it in 1992 and since then has managed and pursued the protection of its wildlife. On the northern sector it borders with the Indios land of Waimiri-Atroari, who prevent fishing boats from sailing the Rio Juaperi, contributing to its preservation. The Xixuaú Reserve measures 172,000 hectares and is virtually uninhabited; roughly 12 adults and 10 children make a living from fishing, agriculture and a little tourism.

In the first period of fieldwork, I spent 4 months in the study area, actively searching for family groups of giant otters. An intense monitoring of the riverbanks was conducted, looking for signs of their presence. For each family group sighted, GPS coordinates as well as information on their habitat and their behaviour were recorded and a data sheet with drawings of the individuals was compiled. A second fieldwork period started in October 2001; it is planned to gather information year-round on movement patterns, habitat use and diet.

The research is being carried out with the help of Dr. Fernando Rosas - Departamento Mamíferos Acuáticos, Inpa (Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazonia) - Manaus.

**Emanuela Evangelista**

(E-mail: [eman\\_evan@hotmail.com](mailto:eman_evan@hotmail.com))

### **A letter from Brazil**

I have gathered some information on giant otters during my recent survey of the entire Rio Purús as far as the border with the state of Acre. With my son Tomas, we surveyed the terra firme forests behind the várzeas for mega fauna, in particular monkeys, but of course also kept our eyes open for giant otters, and found a few refuges still harbouring manatees, giant otters, and Neotropical otters. The nicest population we found at the head of the Lago Jarí, about 40 km inward from the right bank of the Rio Purús, where the meandering Rio Jarí

broadens into the huge lake. In the dry season, there are many suitable high banks for dens, as well as little tributaries/creeks, where there is an enormously extensive igapó in the wet season. I will send Ibama a report of our survey, and use the data on giant otters and manatees, in particular, to try to convince them to add most of the lakeside and especially the headwaters to the already existing 240,000 ha Reserva Biológica do Abufarí, created mainly for the turtle beaches along the Purús. Furthermore, we found healthy populations of giant otters a bit upstream on the Rio Tapauá, which has its source very close to the Rio Juruá. It has extensive igapós, and virtually nobody lives there, but going up the Rio Piranha and Rio Cuniuã, there are a number of indigenous reserves. Wherever we docked our boat, people were eating manatee meat, and also we came upon a fresh skin of an adult giant otter, killed 'just for fun'. Moreover, hundreds of kilometres of igapó, worthless habitat for farming but extremely important for the otters and manatees, had been burnt to the ground.

I am glad I can report on at least two further strongholds for giant otters and manatees not known before, along the Rio Purús. Tomas and I plan to survey at least one major river in the summers of the next five years, and we will keep our eyes open for 'ariranhas'. Furthermore, as soon as Ibama declares our private Lago Uauaçu Rainforest Reserve an RPPN (with perpetual status of conservation), I would like to reintroduce the giant otters kept at Balbina hydroelectric lake north of Manaus (by Eletronorte) in our reserve, where they were reported to swim in the middle of the lake some 40 years ago, but nowadays only can be found way up the headwaters of Rio Uauaçu and Rio Vieira.

Marc van Roosmalen  
(E-mail: [roosmale@internext.com.br](mailto:roosmale@internext.com.br))

## *In brief...*

### **Manu Giant Otter census**

The Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project annually conducts a census of the giant otter population in the Manu Reserved Zone and National Park, investigating the Manu River and up to 28 associated oxbow lakes. During the last census in October / November 2001, a total of 56 different individuals were observed, including 3 in Cocha Juarez, 6 in Cocha Otorongo, 8 in Cocha Salvador plus 1 solitary, and 8 in Cocha Cashu plus 1 solitary. The result, when compared with those of previous years, indicates that the local giant otter population is relatively stable. However, at least 2 families (including Pepe and his mate Doble, see below) failed to produce cubs in 2001, and a further 5 families had only one surviving cub each at the time of censusing.

## *New publications*

A paper entitled "**Aspectos sobre la cacería y la distribución actual e histórica de la nutria gigante (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) en la Amazonía Ecuatoriana**" (in press), by Victor Utreras and Jeffrey Jorgensen of the Wildlife Conservation Society, Quito, Ecuador, will be published in the Proceedings of the Vth International Congress on Wild Fauna Management in Amazonia and Latin America which was held in Cartagena, Colombia, in September 2001. Please contact Victor Utreras ([vmub@wcsecuador.org](mailto:vmub@wcsecuador.org)) for further details.

"**Where the ANDES meet the AMAZON: Peru and Bolivia's Bahuaja-Sonene and Madidi National Parks**" has just been published (Jordi Blassi, Barcelona, 2001 ISBN 84-89119-14-7, hardcover edition, Size: 24x28cm, 336 pages, 336 colour photographs, Retail Price: USD 80.00). Written by Kim Macquarrie, with photographs by André Bärtschi

and a preface by Russell A. Mittermeier (President of Conservation International), it is a dramatic pictorial display of the natural attributes of two adjacent protected areas in two countries. Watch out for several wonderful photographs of giant otters! For information on how to purchase a copy of the book, please contact: [info@grupoinca.com](mailto:info@grupoinca.com) (Regina Malaga, Tel: 054-22-99-98) or [AndreBaertschi@powersurf.li](mailto:AndreBaertschi@powersurf.li). The books are also for sale in Peru in good bookshops and the Alpaca 111 shops.

## ***Forthcoming events***

A one-day course/workshop, similar to that held in Puerto Maldonado in December 2001 (see above under *Project Updates*), will be organised in Cuzco towards the end of March 2002. Those who are interested in participating, please contact Frank Hajek at [fzsgop@terra.com.pe](mailto:fzsgop@terra.com.pe)

## ***Pepe's paragraph***

Hello amigos! I was wondering, do you humans love fish as much as we do? My personal favourite is a catfish, called a *piro*, of the Doradidae family, (which looks like something that should have lived amongst the dinosaurs). The bigger the better! But, you know, most of us eat fish between 10 and 30cm in length. We spend a lot of time hunting because we need to eat about 3 kilos per day. There are some species we prefer especially, I think you call them *boca chico* (*Prochilodus sp.*), *huasaco* (*Hoplias sp.*) and *bujurqui* (*Satanoperca sp.*). If the fish are small, we clutch them between our forefeet, while paddling in the water; if they are a bit bigger, we feel happier taking our meal to the shore so that we can get a proper grip on it. One escaped me yesterday! A friend of mine told me she'd tried a turtle, tasty, she said, but very frustrating because she could only nibble at the legs. Give me a juicy catfish any day! Well, all this talk about food has made me hungry so I'm off. I hope you'll enjoy your next meal as much as I will!



**Pepe**

## ***Notice board***

- We would love to hear from tourism guides and park guards about their personal giant otter observations. Apart from having their experience published in a special section in the next bulletin, the first guide and park guard to send in an article (to [fzsgop@terra.com.pe](mailto:fzsgop@terra.com.pe)) will each receive a copy of Christof Schenk's doctorate thesis "Lobo de Río - Presencia, Uso del Hábitat y Protección en el Perú". So hurry!

---

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](mailto: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.

