

FRIENDS of the Giant Otter

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Editorial

Some modest changes have been made to the layout of this issue of “Friends of the Giant Otter”, and a couple of new sections have been included, ‘Website Selection’ and ‘Anecdotes from the Field’, all of which will hopefully make the newsletter more dynamic. Many thanks to those of you who have sent articles. I’m especially pleased to see Bolivia well represented for the first time. However, I would like to remind you that article contributions are very welcome at any time! Please do not wait for me to contact you, requesting your input. Feel free to send an update on your project, or an observation of interesting giant otter behaviour, or an announcement for a future meeting or new publication etc., whenever the occasion arises. The FoGO newsletter is by you, for you!!

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PROJECT UPDATES & NEW INITIATIVES

PERU New team of the FZS Giant Otter Conservation Project based full-time in PM

The Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project is now represented by an additional, new team of two people to further the work of the project in Puerto Maldonado and surroundings on a full-time basis. Raphael Notin, former Resident Naturalist at Explorer's Inn and responsible for initiating a tourism management and giant otter monitoring plan on Lake Cocococha (see June 2001 and January 2002 FoGO issues), will carry out the monitoring of local giant otter populations and the implementation of lake management plans in the Tambopata National Reserve, the Bahuaja Sonene National park and the buffer zone. Sandra Felipa, with experience in radio and television communication, will be responsible for a new environmental education programme which will not only co-ordinate school visits to Lake Sandoval, but will also provide tourists with a new and informed insight into the area.

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PERU Creation of giant otter national distribution map underway

Together with the Centro de Datos para la Conservacion (Centre for Conservation Data – CDC) of the La Molina Agrarian University, the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project has started a GIS database and mapping initiative, in order to gather all available giant otter data for Peru and create a first accurate national distribution map for the species. Biologist Sandra Isola has been in charge of commencing this work. So far, all the data for the county of Madre de Dios has been gathered and processed. For this, a standard giant otter data processing form has been created, and linked to Arc View mapping software. It is hoped that this data base is a useful tool for future management decisions concerning the species in Peru, allowing easy access to consistent, clear, temporal and spatial giant otter data.

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BOLIVIA Giant otter surveys between 1992-2002

Between 1970 and 1993, the giant otter has been recorded in very few places in Bolivia. The reports pointed to a scattered distribution and a very low total population size. However, detailed surveys have been conducted recently in some remote areas in the northeast of Bolivia. During these surveys, important populations have been encountered in several rivers belonging to the Iténez river basin. In Table 1, we list the surveys that were conducted after 1992.

The main objective of most of these surveys was to provide first population estimates for the giant otter in black or clear water rivers. However, some authors established the relationship between otter distribution and habitat characteristics, investigated the diet of giant otters, or focused on the distribution and use of spraint sites and dens.

At this very moment, all who have been working on giant otter research during the past 10 years (12 Bolivian and foreign scientists) decided to join efforts and to publish fragmented giant otter records in one article, which will be published soon in a Bolivian journal (Revista Boliviana de Ecología y Conservación Ambiental). This publication, which will contain a preliminary distribution map, will be an important first step towards more efficient cooperation between giant otter researchers and more effective conservation of this rare but slowly recovering species.

Table 1 : Surveys for *Pteronura brasiliensis* in Bolivia between 1992 and 2002

	YEAR OF SURVEY	STUDY AREA	SURVEYED RIVER SYSTEMS	HABITAT	STUDY TOPICS
Palmer (no publicado)	2001	Parque Nacional Noel Kempff Mercado	Río Iténez, río Paraguá, río Paucerna, río Verde	Iténez river channel and lakes connected to the river	Distribution, population density, habitat preferences, records of individual throat patterns
Van Damme <i>et al.</i> (2001)	2001	Parque Nacional Noel Kempff Mercado / TCO Bajo Paraguá	Río Paraguá	Main river channel, lakes in permanent or temporary connection with the river	Distribution, population density, diet, records of individual throat patterns, distribution and use of spraint sites and dens, habitat preferences, food availability, interaction with fishermen
Ten (2001) Ten (datos no publicados)	2001	Reserva Inmovilizada Iténez	Río Iténez, río Negro, río San Martín, río San Simón, Arroyo San Antonio	Rivers, lakes and streams	Distribution, population density, distribution of spraint sites and dens
Gonzales Jimenez (1997)	1995	Parque Noel Kempff Mercado / TCO Bajo Paraguá	Río Paraguá, río San Martín	River channels and lakes in connection with river	Distribution, population density, records of individual throat patterns, diet, distribution of spraint sites and dens
FAN-WCS (1994)	1992	Reserva de Vida Silvestre de ríos Blanco y Negro	Río Blanco, río Negro, río Negro de Caimanes, río Peseverancia, Arroyo Chuchui	Rivers and streams	Distribution, population density, distribution of spraint sites and dens
Fraser <i>et al.</i> (1993)	1992	Parque Noel Kempff Mercado	Río Iténez, río Verde, río Paucerna	Main river channels and lakes connected with the river	Distribution, population density, distribution of spraint sites and dens, records of individual throat patterns, sound registration

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BOLIVIA Giant otter research in the Paraguá river (Noel Kempff Mercado NP)

In October and November of 2001, a mixed Belgian-Bolivian team conducted an otter survey in the river Paraguá, which represents the border between the Indigenous Territory Bajo Paraguá and the Noel Kempff Mercado National Park (Bolivia). Belgian biologists were Yolante Delaunoy, Paul Van Damme, Helen Michels, Karen Swaenepoel and Olga Jongeneelen, whereas the Bolivian team consisted of Huascar Muñoz (writing a M.Sc. thesis on fish availability), Fernando Carbajal and Isabel Saravia (writing a Lic. thesis on giant otter diet).

Several giant otter groups in a stretch of more than 200 km of the Paraguá river and in nearby 'bahías' (lakes) were monitored. The estimated population size for this river is above 75. The watershed of the Iténez river may harbour a population of more than 200 individuals, making it one of the strongholds for this species in South America. Interviews with local people revealed that the giant otter is recovering from previous low densities.

Apart from obtaining a first population estimate, the team focused a lot of their effort on a study of the interaction between giant otter and (fisher)men, and on fish availability, a factor that may control local otter population density. Besides, an educational project was set up in nearby villages.

This project received financial and/or logistic support from BP-Birdlife International-Fauna & Flora International (“Bronze Award 2001”), Fundación Amigos Naturaleza (FAN), Centro de Limnología y Recursos Acuáticos (ULRA, Universidad Mayor de San Simón), Laboratory of Aquatic Ecology (University of Leuven, Belgium) and World Conservation Society.

The team plans extensive giant otter surveys in the Bolivian Amazon. In the second half of 2002, additional financial support will enable the exploration of giant otter populations in a Bolivian white-water floodplain.

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BRAZIL Earthwatch and CI otter project started in the Pantanal

In March 2002, the “Projeto Ecolontras” - one of the projects of the “Associação Ecológica Ecomarapendi”, a Brazilian NGO - initiated the sub-project “Pantanal Otters”. It is been undertaken at “Fazenda Rio Negro”, a Conservation International (CI) farm in the Pantanal, Brazil, and is being supported by the Earthwatch Institute and CI.

Among the aquatic predators of the Pantanal, the otters (the Neotropical otter and giant otter) have great ecotourism potential, since they are playful, attractive animals. However, previous studies have shown that otters are sensitive to human disturbance, including poorly managed nature tourism, which can result in decreased habitat quality and reduced reproductive success to the species.

With this project we aim to identify the more important requirements for survival and health of Pantanal otter populations, and to develop, in the future, sustainable use of Pantanal waterways, including ecotourism using the otters as focal species. The results of this research will furnish basic knowledge about natural history and biology of Pantanal otters, enabling us to present long-term information to the makers of public policy, which should allow them to formulate regulations for use of Pantanal watercourses, based on scientific knowledge. The results will be also be disseminated to the general public to promote the use of otters as focal species for ecotourism activities, and offering an alternative source of income for local people.

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SPECIALS

The Guiana Shield Initiative – the giant otter is elected as a flagship species

The Guayana Shield region encompasses 2.5 million km² and accounts for more than 25% of the world’s remaining tropical rain ~~forests, yet has within its borders~~forests, some 80-90% of which is still in pristine condition. The region has as its core the Guayana Shield, one of the oldest geological formations on Earth, but is defined here in biogeographical terms that extend somewhat beyond the limits of the Shield itself. It is bordered to the southeast by the lower Rio Amazonas, to the southwest by the Japura-Caqueta, to the far west by the Serrania de Chiribiquete in Colombian Amazonia, to the northwest by the Rio Guaviare and the Rio Orinoco, and to the east and northeast by the Atlantic Ocean. As such, it includes the entire area of the countries of Suriname and Guyana, all of the French department of French Guiana, all of Venezuela south of the Orinoco (States of Amazonas, Bolivar and Delta Amacuro), southeastern Colombian Amazonia between the Guaviare and the Caqueta, and a

large portion of extreme northeastern Brazil, including all of the states of Amapa and Roraima, and the northern portions of the states of Amazonas and Para.

Unfortunately, the Guiana Shield Region is now coming under the same threats that have greatly reduced or entirely eliminated tropical forests in other parts of the world. Unsustainable logging, poor mining practices, and hydroelectric projects have already impacted significant areas and could increase dramatically in the next few years. Monoculture agriculture (e.g., oil palm, soybeans) of the kind that has transformed large areas of Africa, southeast Asia and the Cerrado region of Brazil is another potential threat. Bushmeat hunting and wildlife trade are also problems, although ~~they don't approach the scale of what is taking place in tropical if done sustainably they could provide an alternative use of the Africa and Southeast Asia forests.~~ Many of these activities are driven by the pressing need to alleviate poverty, but often only contribute to exacerbating it. The countries of the Guianan Region have a unique opportunity to learn from the experiences and mistakes of the rest of the tropical world, to define a new development path that takes advantage of their unique and privileged position, and to engage in truly sustainable activities that both alleviate poverty and maintain healthy, functioning ecosystems.

To define conservation priorities for the Guayana Shield region (see January 2002 FoGO issue), IUCN-Netherlands (which co-ordinates the Guiana Shield Initiative), the United Nations Development Programme, and Conservation International co-sponsored a workshop entitled *The Guayana Shield Conservation Priority Setting Workshop*. This important exercise involved more than 100 of the world's leading experts on the biodiversity of the region, complemented by a group of specialists on the socio-economic forces at play, and took place April 5-9, 2002, in the Torarica Hotel in Paramaribo, Suriname.

From the outset, the Workshop recognised that this region *in its entirety* is a very high priority in global terms. However, the participants sought to provide the most up-to-date information to enable priority setting within the region and to identify those areas most in need of immediate attention, either because of high biodiversity value or because of imminent threat.

One of the many Workshop results was a species-specific recommendation, namely, "Recognition of the importance of the Critically Endangered giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) as another key flagship species¹, especially given the fact that this region is now one of its last major strongholds and that it is now directly threatened by the toxic effects of unregulated gold-mining concentrating in river systems." For more details about the Guiana Shield Initiative, contact Amy Mackinven at amy.mackinven@nciucn.nl.

(¹in addition to the Guianan Cock-of the rock (*Rupicola rupicola*))

Paramaribo Technical Statement

REGULARS

The Latest Publications

El Manu y Otras Experiencias de Investigación y Manejo de Bosques Neotropicales (Ed. Lily Rodriguez, 2001) is the product of an international symposium, held in Puerto Maldonado between the 4th and 7th of June, 2001, organised by Pro Manu. This event brought together around 150 people all dedicated to harmonising the conservation of biodiversity with the

needs of the local human population. The Proceedings includes 40 papers on issues as diverse as forest composition, structure and dynamics, to forest and fauna management, to monitoring design and implementation. The FZS Giant Otter Conservation Project contributed two papers, entitled “Manejo del Turismo de Naturaleza en Hábitat de Lobo de Río (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) en el Sureste del Peru” (Hajek & Groenendijk, 2001) and “Monitoreo del Lobo de Río (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) en la Reserva de Biosfera del Manu: Metodología y Resultados” (Groenendijk et al.). For more information contact fzsgop@terra.com.pe

The *IUCN Otter Specialist Group Bulletin* is produced twice a year, in April and October, and publishes articles, reports, symposium announcements and information on recent publications dealing with the world's 13 otter species. Many members of the IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group regularly contribute papers on their work to the OSGB. Contact Arno Gutleb, the Editor, for details on how to subscribe (arno.gutleb@algemeen.tox.wau.nl).

Website Selection

Launched in July 1998, <http://otternet.com> provides general, not overly scientific information and fun for the whole family, with more than 50 pages of interesting details on the world's otter species, as well as films, pictures, sounds and games. Although it seems to be aimed at a younger audience, the site has many links and also accesses the professional community by hosting the IUCN Otter Listserve. Any relevant question can be sent to Otternet and will be forwarded to professionals caring for or researching otters. A great way to raise otter awareness, especially amongst school children!

Forthcoming Events

Aquatic Mammal Specialist Conferences

The 10th Working Meeting of Aquatic Mammal Specialists of South America and the 4th Congress of the Latin American Society of Aquatic Mammal Specialists will be held between the 14th and 19th of October, 2002, in Valdivia, Chile. The objectives of the two parallel meetings are to (1) present and discuss progress of aquatic mammal research projects in Latin America; (2) to reflect academically, multidisciplinary, institutionally, and internationally the challenges and future projections regarding the study and conservation of aquatic mammals; and (3) to promote and strengthen the knowledge, integration and collaboration between investigators in Latin America. For more information, write to Rodrigo Hucke-Gaete or Francisco A. Viddi at 10RT@surnet.cl

Giant otter survey methodology and habitat management standardisation course

The Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project (FZSGOP) is organizing a two-week giant otter survey methodology and habitat management standardisation course, to take place during the last week of November and the first week of December, 2002, in the Bahuaja Sonene National Park and Tambopata Reserved Zone, Madre de Dios, south-eastern Peru. FZSGOP would like to take this opportunity to share some of its experiences (over 12 years) and to learn about those in other countries.

The objectives of the course are to train persons who are planning to start, or are currently involved with projects involving giant otter surveys and monitoring. The idea is to learn from each other, and to begin to ensure that the same methodology is used in different countries,

producing usefully comparable survey and monitoring results according to different habitats. Subjects covered will be how to:

- * recognize indirect signs of giant otter presence such as dens and campsites,
- * estimate when they were last used,
- * differentiate them from the dens and spraints of the Neotropical otter (*Lontra longicaudis*),
- * identify the tracks of both otter species,
- * use GPS for survey and management purposes,
- * maximise chances of sighting giant otters and how to film giant otter throat markings,
- * manage tourism so that it is a force for conservation rather than a threat to the species,
- * manage giant otter habitat within the context of protected area management.

The course will take place in two different giant otter habitats, roughly one week in each. The first is a small river system, the Palma Real, where we will travel in a 9m canoe. We will also be visiting two (possibly 3) oxbow lakes, Tres Chimbadas and Cocococha (and Sandoval), where the principles of tourism management will be discussed and demonstrated.

FZSGOP will be able to cover all food, logistics and boarding costs in the field, as well as all national flights (from Lima to Puerto Maldonado and back). A small proportion of some international flights will also be covered by FZSGOP. Due to logistical constraints, a maximum of 5 participants will be able to join the course. Each participant must be able to prove that he/she is starting, or has recently started, a giant otter project of at least one-year duration, or is involved with several field periods over consecutive years in any South American country. Participants should cover their own international flight costs wherever possible. For more information, contact Jessica Groenendijk (fzsgop@terra.com.pe).

Anecdotes from the Field

My experience of a cub's death on Cocha Salvador, Manu

This happened in August 2001 in Cocha Salvador. We left early in the morning for the lake with a group of tourists. For about an hour we drifted on the catamaran without seeing the giant otters, then we sighted them between the first and second observation platform. It must have been around 7:30am. In silence, we slowly approached the group, which was near some logs, eating fish. The cubs were already beginning to hunt for themselves. I saw two; in total there were 8 individuals that day. We watched them for about 20 minutes, close to the shore. Then they began to swim towards us. They were peaceful, eating, and generally behaving normally.

Once I saw them approaching us, I told the tourists that we would back away a little and that, in any case, we had observed them for quite a while already. At one moment, the whole family was hidden by the shore beneath some overhanging shrubs, out of sight. We heard loud cries and sounds, but at first I thought they were squabbling amongst themselves over a fish or something like that. I had heard and seen them doing this before and the sounds were very similar, but they were too intense and also all the group members were involved. It lasted only a short while and then all the otters suddenly emerged and we could observe them again. We began to row away rapidly because we could see that the group was highly agitated, although at no moment did they show alarm at us. Then I saw the mother carrying a cub by the back and blood was flowing from the cub's mouth; it appeared to have a cut on its neck.

Everything happened very fast and I was shocked, because I had watched the cubs growing up. The rest of the family left the area, including the mother, and I could see how the cub tried to swim but finally sank. A minute passed and the mother returned and began to search desperately for the cub, which did not reappear. We rowed away until they were out of sight, not wishing to interfere with or bother them. It must have been a very tense moment for them. When we were leaving, we sighted a caiman nearby the area, but I don't think that it had anything to do with the cub's death; rather, it had probably been attracted by the noise and blood. The cub's cut looked more like a deep scratch. Unfortunately, I can't be certain, it all happened in seconds.

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Pepe's Paragraph

It's me again! Well now, I have been asked to tell you something about our toilet habits. I can't imagine why you should be interested but I've heard that you otter people are seriously fascinated by this end of things, so who am I to refuse? At certain strategic locations, near our dens for, instance, or where a tributary meets a river, we make small clearings on the bank, generally high above water level. We squash and chew any ground plants from an area of several square meters, and then we...um, well, we go to the toilet. All of us together. Next we spread everything enthusiastically about with our feet to produce a wonderful aroma. Finally, we might rub our bodies over the soil or just relax for a bit. These places are very important to us because they tell our neighbours (who we don't really like to meet) exactly where we've been and when. The funny thing is, I once overheard a guide telling his group of tourists that these are the places where we eat!! Ha, ha, ha!! Hee, hee! Mind you, it's an easy mistake to make because there are often lots of fish scales on our campsites (that's what we call them). Anyway, now you know. Must dash, nature calls! Ciao!



Pepe

Notice Board

☺ Fabiana H., the first guide to send in an article for the "From the Field" section of the bulletin, wins a free copy of Christof Schenck's doctorate thesis "Lobo de Río - Presencia, Uso del Hábitat y Protección en el Perú". Congratulations!

! Call for project and giant otter photographs! Would you like to share your pictures of giant otters or of yourself in action, with readers of "Friends of the Giant Otter"? Send them to the Editor and you may see yourself or your activities in the next issue!

Comments and written contributions are gratefully received. Please send them to: **The Editor, Friends of the Giant Otter, Calle 5, No. 131, Dpto. 202, Urb. Los Jasmínes, Santiago de Surco, Lima** 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. The opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily shared by the Farnkfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project.



