

# FRIENDS of the Giant Otter

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## Editorial

Although it proved not to be possible to distribute three bulletins this year as was hoped, this issue is extra packed with interesting and exciting developments. Inside you will read all about the first-ever giant otter field course, for which participants from 5 different South American countries were invited. There are reports on initiatives in Yasuni National Park, the Pantanal, and the little known Purus River in Peru. Also, the Chairman of the IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group, Claus Reuther, explains what the OSG is and how it works. All this and more, in addition to our regular features and a fantastic opportunity to win a spectacular book. Like Pepe, we wish you a successful and fulfilling 2003 and hope that you will keep in touch!!

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# PROJECT UPDATES & NEW INITIATIVES

## **PERU Giant Otters in Manu now officially protected**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 2002, Manu National Park in southeastern Peru was extended by just over 215,500 hectares, to include the majority of what was formerly the Reserved Zone, as well as additional land along the Pinquen River. The happy news, declared in the government newspaper “El Peruano”, was welcomed by the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project (FZSGOP), which, since its initiation in 1990, has consistently urged the elevation of the conservation status of the Reserved Zone.

No less than 80% of the Reserved Zone (194,841 hectares), and a large chunk of the headwaters of the pristine Pinquen River (20,696 hectares) are now included in the National Park. FZS Project research during the last decade has shown that more than 50% of Manu’s giant otter population inhabited what was formerly the Reserved Zone. Moreover, a vast majority of large oxbow lakes, the favorite habitat of the giant otter and where an average of around 80% of cubs are born every year, are located here. The new decree thus officially protects not only Manu’s entire giant otter population but also the region where the species’ reproductive success is greatest. The increased status will also permit a more integral approach to tourism management in the Park.

The 20% of the Reserved Zone that was not incorporated into the Manu National Park forms part of the Amigos River watershed and has been included in the adjacent Amigos River Conservation Concession, thereby creating an effective buffer zone to the east of the Park.

In September, the FZS Project once again conducted its annual giant otter census in Manu, this time secure in the knowledge that the population was safe, at least from commercial interests such as hydrocarbon exploitation, logging and fisheries. A total of 63 different individuals were observed, including 4 in Isla de los Valles, 3 in Cocha Juarez, 7 in Otorongo, 12 on Salvador, and 5 plus two solitaries on Cashu. Of the 11 otter families encountered, 6 had a litter of cubs. There were many exciting changes, for instance, we were delighted to recognize three animals that we had not seen for 3 years. In addition, two new families were observed.

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## **PERU Giant otter survey methodology and habitat management standardization**

Between the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November and the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, 2002, the first giant otter field course took place in order to standardize distribution survey and population census methodologies as well habitat management techniques (see June 2001 FoGO issue). The course was organized by FZSGOP and brought together giant otter specialists from several countries: Helen Waldemarin and Emanuela Evangelista from Brazil, Luis Pinos from Ecuador, Paul van Damme from Bolivia, H  l  ne Jacques from French Guiana and Juan Carlos Botello from Colombia.

From Lima we traveled to the town of Puerto Maldonado in the department of Madre de Dios. After meeting up with Frank and Jessica, we began our trip on the Madre de Dios River accompanied by Dario and Armando Cruz, both project assistants. Our destination was the

Palma Real River watershed, located approximately 4 hours from Puerto Maldonado, within the Tambopata National Reserve and the Bahuaja Sonene National Park.

During the first 6 days we investigated the Patuyacu, tributary of the Palma Real River, for signs of giant otter activity. Despite frequent heavy rain, we encountered a pair of giant otters on the Palma Real and a group of 3 individuals on the Patuyacu, as well as several campsites and dens, of varying freshness. The idea was to contribute and compare experiences from each of our work areas, which include flooded forests, oxbow lakes, small rivers, and large rivers with rocky banks, to improve upon a first draft of a paper on distribution survey and census methodology standardization, and to test the accompanying data collection sheets such that they can be applied to any region throughout the giant otter's range in South America. A number of workshops were held to this effect, as well as a brainstorming session on how to incorporate the standardized methodologies within an overall monitoring strategy (using that which exists for *Lutra lutra* as a starting point).

The second part of the course brought us to the relative comfort of three different tourism lodges, each involved with tourism management plans on two lakes, Cocococha and Tres Chimbadas. Since tourism is an important, potentially sustainable activity which can be harnessed as a force for conservation in many of our study sites, we were interested to learn more about the collaboration of FZSGOP, tourism companies, and the Protected Area authorities, in particular how to minimize the impact of tourists on giant otters yet maximize tourist satisfaction.

We would like to thank FZSGOP, and the 'chuyachaqui' brothers, Armando and Dario, for making our visit a great experience.

### **Course participants**

#### **PERU Giant Otters in the Alto Purús River**

With the recent creation of the Alto Purús Reserved Zone adjacent to Manú National Park, biologists and conservationists in Peru have begun to focus more attention on this very isolated corner of the country. In the January 2002 issue of Friends of the Giant Otter, Marc van Roosmalen confirmed the existence of small numbers of giant otters in the Brazilian section of the Purús River, but very little was known until recently about the Peruvian headwater region. The latter is home to small villages of people from many indigenous groups, as well as numerous nomadic uncontacted groups, and it remains little connected to the rest of Peru, either by river or by road.

In July, I entered the region with a group of biologists from the Centre for Tropical Conservation of Duke University, which also operates the Cocha Cashu Biological Station in Manu National Park. Our group (including my husband, Dr. John Terborgh) has a long history of concern for maintaining top carnivores in wild lands, and due to the establishment of the Alto Purús Reserved Zone, and its connectedness to the Manu and the Amarakaeri Reserved Zone (to the East of Manu NP), we recognized that Peru may now offer the world's best hope for maintaining viable populations of certain Neotropical carnivores that require large home ranges. As part of our "Rare and Endangered Carnivores of the Amazon" project, we are focusing on studying the basic natural history and threats to the conservation of two of the least studied Neotropical carnivores, namely the short-eared dog (*Atelocynus microtus*) and the giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*).

Despite intense hunting pressure in the Purus region, our team was able to confirm the existence of both species by footprints, scat and direct observation. We conducted community and field surveys, including visits to 13 lakes on the Alto Purús River above Puerto Esperanza and the Curanja River (a tributary to the Alto Purús). We were only able to locate one family of giant otters during the 1-month trip, on Cocha Guacamayo near the small community of Laureano, close to the border of the Purús Reserved Zone. The group numbered five individuals, and behaved extremely anxiously around humans, even seeming to abandon the lake upon detecting us. Unfortunately, most of the lakes in the region are fished by villagers, and since people see them as competition for fish, they reported routinely chasing off solitaires found on lakes near their villages. The Cocha Guacamayo otter family was encountered well above the largest lakes to be found on the Alto Purús, and undoubtedly remains there because the location is further upstream than most villagers typically travel to undertake a fishing or hunting expedition.

Reports of large numbers of giant otters on the Maniche River well inside the reserve itself were not verified during this trip. However, it is likely that such reports are true, and that the Maniche provides the major source population of otters for colonizing downstream areas. Unfortunately, the otters do not appear to be successful at re-colonising areas they were hunted out of during the 60's and 70's for the fur trade, and this is probably due to continued human pressure and fishing methods used (long gill nets or "tramperas" are used on most lakes with good fish populations).

Not surprisingly, community members only reported seeing giant otters on the Alto Purús River, which hosts the largest oxbow lakes in the region. Nearly all reported sightings were of solitary otters, which do appear on lakes near villages from time to time. On the Curanja River, where very few oxbow lakes are formed, most people did not recognize photos of giant otter, except for a few of the oldest community villagers, who knew it well from the days when skins were a valuable commodity in the region, and were worth travelling long distances to hunt. Younger villagers frequently confused our questions about giant otters with the smaller Neotropical otter (*Lontra longicaudis*) (which indicated their abundance on creeks in the area), and few even knew the name for giant otter in Spanish or their own languages. We intend to return to the area to promote better awareness of giant otter biology, ecology, and conservation concerns, and to organize an environmental education programme to bring to Alto Purús communities in 2003. Any suggestions or comments are welcome.

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### **ECUADOR Giant Otter area of activity and habitat use in Yasuni National Park**

Giant otter populations in Ecuador are considerably diminished in size and are currently threatened by habitat destruction, aquatic contamination and hunting. This study forms part of the 'Landscape Project' of the Wildlife Conservation Society and has as its objectives: *i.* to identify habitat parameters that influence habitat use, *ii.* to understand the spatial-temporal distribution of groups, comparing between rivers, *iii.* to identify the relationship between diet and fish availability, and a possible competition for resources between fishermen and the otter, and *iiii.* to highlight the main threats to the species in the area. Between August 2001 and March 2002, 20 km stretches were investigated along the Rivers Tambococha and Jatuncocha (northeastern limit of Yasuni National Park). The spatial-temporal distribution and habitat use were analyzed on the basis of indirect signs (latrines, dens and tracks) and

direct sightings. Latrines and dens were characterized and habitat parameters were recorded at each site as well as its geographic location.

To establish the area of activity of the groups, the most extreme data points (direct and indirect) were used. A group of 6 individuals was encountered on the Tambococha River and another of 6 on the Jatuncocha. The substrate, shade and height were the most important variables that influenced latrine use, while distance to the river, substrate, shade and forest type (flooded or terra firme) most influenced the establishment of dens. Differences were found in the spatial-temporal distribution of signs between the two rivers: the relationship between water level and spatial distribution was stronger in the Tambococha River. The Tambococha group occupied 18.4 km of river (average width 23.95 m) with the most distant data point being 43 m from the river bank. The Jatuncocha group inhabited 20 km of river (average width 19.19 m) as well as the Jatuncocha lake (6 km in length by 350 m in width on average); the furthest sign was 25 m from the river bank. In order to define the 'core area', and to identify group movement patterns during the rainy season and compare them to those observed during the dry season, it is recommended to continue this study in the longer term. Although the giant otter population in the area appears to be healthy, the increase in hunting, hydrocarbon activities, and fishing with dynamite may endanger it in the future. It is vital to initiate an environmental education campaign and, if necessary, increase control measures.

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### **BRAZIL Distribution, status and ecology of giant river otters in the Pantanal**

On August 2000, Sociedade Civil Mamirauá, a Brazilian NGO working with flooded forests in the Amazon, established a research centre (Centro de Conservação do Pantanal) in the Pantanal of Mato Grosso do Sul. One of the projects being carried out concerns the distribution, status and ecology of giant river otters. Giant otter populations have been recovering in some portions of their range, and animals are relatively easily seen in the rivers of the area. The aim of the project is to produce an estimate of the otter population now and monitor it such as to evaluate changes and impacts from fisheries, tourism and related activities.

At the moment work is concentrated along the Touro Morto channel, Aquidauana and Miranda rivers. Three families and 2 new pairs of giant otters have been identified in the Touro Morto and a small portion of the Aquidauana. Surveys will be conducted during this dry season along the full lengths of Miranda and Aquidauana rivers, and ecological studies will be focused in the 15-km stretch of the Touro Morto channel. Chest patches and sexes are being identified and faeces collected.

Future plans include capture and implantation of intraperitoneal VHF-transmitters to allow for monitoring the animals during the wet season as well and define additional habitat requirements. The project also includes education components, including production of environmental education materials and training of local students.

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# SPECIALS

## **The IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group – the world-wide network of specialists on otters and their conservation needs.**

OSG, the Otter Specialist Group, is one of more than 120 Specialist Groups and Task Forces of the Species Survival Commission (SSC) of the World Conservation Union (IUCN). According to the by-laws of the IUCN Species Survival Commission, this Specialist Group

- provides leadership for the conservation of all otter species (*Lutrinae*),
- determines and reviews on a continuing basis the status and needs of otters, and promotes the implementation of necessary research, conservation and management programmes by appropriate organizations and governments,
- makes known the status and conservation needs of otters, and
- promotes the wise management of otter species.

The OSG is not an independent group or organisation. It is part of the IUCN and SSC networks and is therefore integrated into the organisational structures and is subject to the same regulations as this global conservation union. Moreover, the OSG does not have its own funds nor is it regularly funded by IUCN or SSC. All the costs of the secretariat, based at the office of the Chairman, are borne by the German Association for Otter Conservation (Aktion Fischotterschutz e.V.). All the coordinators, representatives and members are responsible for any expenses resulting from their OSG membership, or receive support from the institutions they are connected with. All members of the OSG contribute to its work on a voluntary basis. This is also the reason why the OSG has no funds available to directly support research or conservation projects. The OSG might be able to support fundraising activities, but it is not able to undertake the fundraising itself for any otter project of a member or non-member. Some funding organisations require a statement from the OSG as part of their decision-making process when they receive applications for the funding of otter research or conservation projects. The decision, if such an application is supported by the OSG, is based on the quality of the project design and of the priorities defined by the members of the OSG.

The OSG was established in 1977 and was chaired by Dr. Nicole Duplaix between 1977 and 1985, by Dr. Pat Foster-Turley between 1985 and 1993, by Prof. Padma de Silva between 1993 and 1998, and by Claus Reuther since 1998. Summarising, the OSG can be described as a world-wide network of specialists volunteering to support information exchange, to initiate activities and to improve and to standardise methods related to research and conservation of otters and their habitats.

Besides the general assistance provided by the IUCN and the SSC, the main tools of the OSG to fulfil these tasks are

- the organisation of meetings and conferences (as for instance the International Otter Colloquium),
- the organisation of workshops and training courses,
- the preparation of Action Plans on a global, regional or national level,
- the initiation of research or model projects,
- the evaluation of methodologies and the collection of best practice examples,
- the preparation of guidelines or standards (for instance by task forces).

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## **Giant Otter conservation writing competition**

Giant otter conservation in the next decade will require focused actions directed at specific problem areas. In order to highlight the experience and knowledge of those working on or researching specific issues relevant to the long-term wellbeing of giant otter populations, the FoGO bulletin is organizing the first giant otter writing competition with the following theme: “*What is the single greatest challenge for giant otter conservation and how do we overcome it?*”

A copy of the spectacular book “*Celebration of the Land: The Last Sanctuaries*” will be awarded to the person who writes the best essay. Thirteen of this planet’s ecoregions that are outstanding due to their scenic beauty and great biological importance were chosen for this extraordinary 300-page presentation by Cemex. Each of these protected areas is documented by one of the world’s most renowned nature photographers - Thomas Mangelsen (Yellowstone/Grand Teton), André Bärtschi (Manu/Tambopata-Candamo/Madidi), James Brandenburg (Ellesmere), Tui de Roy (Galapagos), Art Wolfe (Denali), Patricio Robles Gil (Sonoran Desert/Gulf of California), Mitsuaki Iwago (Serengeti/ Masai Mara/Ngorongoro), Francisco Márquez (Cabañeros), Frans Lanting (Chobe/Kalahari/Okavango Delta), Günter Ziesler (Ranthambore), Fritz Pölking (Trans-Altai/Gobi), Alain Compost (Sumatra) and Jean-Paul Ferrero (Kakadu) – who tell us of their involvement with the last sanctuaries.

The competition is open to everyone, the essay, in Spanish or English, should be no longer than 500 words, and your entry must be labeled ‘Writing Competition’ and sent by e-mail to Jessica Groenendijk ([fzsgop@erra.com.pe](mailto:fzsgop@erra.com.pe)) by the 14th of February, 2003, at the latest. All entries will be judged by a panel of otter specialists and the winning essay will be published in the March 2003 Friends of the Giant Otter bulletin. Good luck!

## **REGULARS**

### **The Latest Publications**

Island Press has recently published “*Making Parks Work – Strategies for Preserving Tropical Nature*”, edited by John Terborgh, Carel van Schaik, Lisa Davenport (a regular FoGO contributor) and Madhu Rao. Divided into four parts, it serves as an introduction to the current status of the world’s protected areas, then presents a series of case studies, followed by an analysis of a wide range of problems that parks face at different hierarchical levels, and concludes by addressing possible solutions to make parks work. It has also been published in Portuguese and a Spanish version will follow soon. For more information, contact Lisa Davenport at [lisa.davenport@duke.edu](mailto:lisa.davenport@duke.edu)

Van Damme *et al.* have published their comprehensive paper (see May 2002 FoGO issue) “*Distribución y Estado de las Poblaciones de Londra (Pteronura brasiliensis) en Bolivia*” in the Revista Boliviana de Ecología y Conservación Ambiental 9: 3-13, 2001, with an abstract in English. Please contact [paul.vandamme@bo.net](mailto:paul.vandamme@bo.net) for further details.

### **Website Selection**

Perhaps it is a while since you last checked out [www.giantotters.com](http://www.giantotters.com)? Have another look. Launched at the beginning of 2002, it is the web site of the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project in Peru. Designed to inform and entertain adults as well as children, it is

divided in 8 sections – Threats and Conservation, Tourism, GO Zone (for kids), Photograph Gallery, Straight from the Forest, Giant Otters and the Rainforest, Background to the Project, and How You Can Help. Various components of the site are not yet active and it is available only in English, but we hope to work on and implement changes during 2003. Please send ideas on what else you would like to see online!

## Forthcoming Events

The IX International Otter Colloquium is planned for June 2004, to be held at the Frostburg State University in Maryland, USA. These are tentative arrangements so far, please contact Tom Serfass at [TSERFASS@mail.frostburg.edu](mailto:TSERFASS@mail.frostburg.edu) for more information. It may seem early to start thinking about this event, but if there is one congress you, as giant otter specialist, cannot miss, it is this one!

## Pepe's Paragraph

Well, my friends, a lot has happened since I last wrote to you. Life has not been easy. You remember in the 2<sup>nd</sup> FoGO issue I told you that I'd found the perfect mate? Unfortunately, that situation went pear-shaped. She left me and my territory on the river for some upstart living on a tranquil oxbow lake. Can you believe it?! This is not usual; as you know, we are monogamous and once we pair up something pretty drastic, like a death, has to occur for a couple or family group to break up. In any case, not all the news is bad. I too have found a new partner (hers had also disappeared) and I now live with her family and our first cub on a lake right at the top extreme of my former territory. It is true that life on lakes is a lot more peaceful than on the river; no current to fight against, no abrupt changes in water level, no boat traffic, greater visibility and, most importantly, a lot more fish! So all's well that ends well. Hoping you have a wonderfully Happy New Year, saludos,



Pepe

## Notice Board

- We did not receive an 'Anecdote from the Field' for this issue. I would like to remind readers, especially tourist guides and researchers, that we are interested in any unusual or exciting giant otter field observations to include under this section.

! Call for project and giant otter photographs! Would you like to share your pictures of giant otters or of your project in action, with readers of "Friends of the Giant Otter"? Send them to the Editor as jpeg files and you may see your activities illustrating the next FoGO 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 Jasmynes, Santiago de Surco, Lima** 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. The opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily shared by the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project ([www.giantotters.com](http://www.giantotters.com)).

