

FRIENDS of the Giant Otter

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Editorial

In this issue, Nicole Duplaix has helped to highlight the fact that the bulletin is not just for letting each other know the latest stage of our projects. Yet the giant otter conservation writing competition (see issue No.6, December 2002) met with a spectacular lack of success; not a single essay was sent in, despite a very special prize. Does this mean that we are all too busy, or that nobody is reading this newsletter, or that we don't have an opinion on what is the single greatest challenge for giant otter conservation (the theme of the competition)?! What about you students out there? Here is your chance to ask questions and get them answered! And what about the tourism guides? You have more opportunity than many to observe new giant otter behaviour. I would like to remind you once again, especially those readers who do not work in the field, that comments on the content of the bulletin, or articles expressing an opinion about a current issue, or an interesting anecdote, are very welcome, any time.

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PROJECT UPDATES & NEW INITIATIVES

PERU The Lake Sandoval Interpretation and Control Centre is up and running

One hour down-river from Puerto Maldonado, a town of nearly 50,000 habitants, a four kilometre trail begins for Lake Sandoval, a pristine lake located within the Tambopata National Reserve (TNR). There, one can find a high diversity of wildlife, including a family of giant otters, and an impressively large Mauritia palm stand. Consequently, the lake attracts numerous tourists; in fact it is the most visited area of the TNR (about 50% of the TNR's visitors go to Sandoval; from July 2002 to July 2003, about 8000 persons entered).

Aware of the increasing human activity and the pressure it puts on this environment, and especially on the resident giant otter family, the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project proposed a management strategy for the lake and its surroundings (2001) to the National Institute for Natural Resources (INRENA). Apart from the zonification of the lake (in terms of boat access), which is in process as we write, various other activities were proposed and implemented:

- In July 2002, the Frankfurt Zoological Society co-financed and implemented a Control Post at the entrance of the trail leading to Lake Sandoval, where INRENA gamewardeners are now able to carry out their functions.
- A few weeks later, we started the Sandoval Environmental Education Programme directed at schools of Puerto Maldonado. The Project's environmental educator, Carlos Arevalo, guides each class to the lake, with the volunteer help of university students. The main subjects treated during the programme are habitats and nature conservation. We are continuing this programme in 2003.
- Lastly, since the beginning of this year, the Project has focused on developing and implementing an Interpretation Centre to be located at the Control Post, where local people from Puerto Maldonado, kids from the Sandoval Environmental Education Programme, and national and international tourists enter to visit the lake. This centre was developed not only to be a powerful educational tool, but also an additional attraction away from the lake, decreasing the amount of time spent on the lake by visitors and consequently reducing the pressure put on the giant otter habitat.

One of the main objectives of the centre was to inspire the visitors to marvel at some of the wonders of nature, and by doing so invite them to choose their role in the web of life. We developed approximately 30 bilingual installations (Spanish and English) organized in five areas by the following themes: the aquatic environment (formation of oxbow lakes, aquatic plants, herbivores and carnivores), the conservation of water, the skills of some jungle animals, the history of the department of Madre de Dios, and the National System of Protected Areas.

The whole process involved a large team of local people, as well as the park wardens. Thanks to their skills and knowledge, we were able to use appropriate wood as primary material and rely on local artists and businesses to realize each step; this was both a challenge and a rich experience. The results of this cooperative work are impressive. An inauguration celebration took place July 21st at the Sandoval Control Post and its new interpretation centre under a huge fig tree. About 70 persons – representing local institutions, authorities, NGOs, professionals and residents - gathered to break a bottle of champagne. Entrance is free, and there is lots to learn... so, come visit any time!

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PERU Giant otter survey specialists meet again in Puerto Maldonado...

Between the 17th and 26th of June, giant otter specialists from Venezuela (Keila Matos), Suriname (Nicole Duplaix) Guyana (Indranee Roopsind), Brazil (Fernando Rosas, Galia Ely de Mattos and Miriam Marmontel), and Ecuador (Victor Utreras and Geovanna Lasso), participated in the second, 12-day Giant Otter Survey Methodology and Habitat Management Standardisation field course/workshop. The latter was organized by the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project and held in the Bahujaja Sonene National Park and Tambopata Reserved Zone, Madre de Dios, south-eastern Peru.

The course began with a field trip of 6 days to the Palma Real and Patuyacu Rivers, with the aid of boatdrivers Dario and Rony, in search of indirect signs and direct sightings of giant otters. We were lucky on the first day when two giant otters were briefly observed on the Palma Real River. In the following days, we visited Lakes Cocococha and Tres Chimbadas, where monitoring of the resident groups of giant otters and the management of tourism was discussed, together with the guides of the two lodges. In Cocococha we were fortunate to observe 8 individuals (two were cubs) swimming and hunting on the opposite shore; later they approached to within a few metres from our observation point, before heading off peacefully. On Tres Chimbadas, 5 otters emerged out of the morning mist, and disappeared as unexpectedly.

In parallel with the field visit, discussions and workshops were held to determine the terminology, and parameters for correct identification of indirect signs, to be used as part of a Standard survey methodology for the species. Preliminary points for the establishment of a continental distribution survey strategy were also discussed, but it was recognised and proposed that a meeting be organised in December to deal with this issue in depth. A document entitled "Giant otter distribution surveys, population censuses and monitoring – Towards a Standard Method" (Groenendijk et al.) is currently being drafted with contributions from all those who participated in the first workshop (held in November 2002 in Peru) and this workshop.

Thank you FZS, and Dario and Rony, for this valuable initiative!

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BOLIVIA Giant Otter workshop in Cochabamba

On the 5th and 6th of August, 15 giant otter workers met in Cochabamba to interchange ideas about the development of a giant otter conservation strategy in Bolivia. The first part of the workshop consisted in a presentation by special invitee Jessica Groenendijk (Frankfurt Zoological Society) on the Standard Methodology for giant otter surveys, and a presentation of the population status of the species in the departments of La Paz, Pando (Rob Wallace), Beni (Silvia Ten), Santa Cruz and Cochabamba (Paul Van Damme). The second part of the workshop consisted in an identification of threats to giant otter survival in Bolivia. Moreover, the methods to be used for the implementation of the National Giant Otter Survey were discussed. One of the conclusions of the discussion was that top priority should be given to the identification of giant otter strongholds in Bolivia. The second day of the workshop was devoted to the elaboration of a national action plan for giant otter conservation.

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VENEZUELA A Masters thesis will hopefully revive national interest in the species

Since March this year, I have been developing a research project on the giant otter in the lower 'llanos' of Venezuela. This investigation will form the basis for my Masters thesis on wildlife management, and focuses on giant otter habitat use and its seasonality, population size, and territory size. Social characteristics of the species will be explored, such as group structure and dynamics, and number, age and sex of individuals. Diet will also be investigated as part of this study, the field phase of which will conclude in December 2003. The project is being undertaken in a small 'Hato' (private reserve) of 5000 hectares, which includes three bodies of water, the most important one of which, known as 'el garza', seems to be preferred by these animals. Results so far indicate the existence of only two groups, one of 10-11 individuals and the other of 8; it seems that one animal is moving between these two groups. Almost 30 dens have been found, which is surprising for only two groups. With respect to diet, it has been observed that it is based on approximately 6 fish species. The main objective is to present a management plan to the Hato administrators in order to limit ecotourism activities, towards the protection of the species. In view of the fact that this is a pioneer project in Venezuela, it is hoped that other investigators will be encouraged to work with the species thereby contributing to its conservation.

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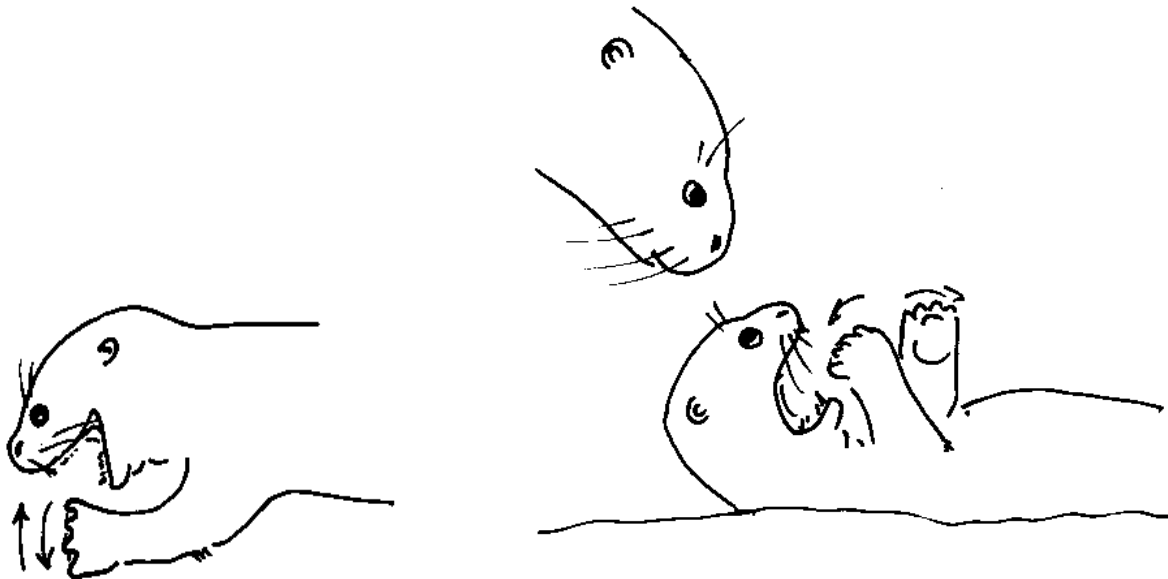
SPECIALS

Cub submissive panic posture

Background: Two hand-reared male juveniles (Rewa and Parawong) in Guyana, both aged 5 months, had been raised with an older sub-adult female (Persephone) that had been successfully re-introduced and lived with a wild group (Group K). Two months later, she returned for a visit and when re-introduced to the cubs they both elicited extreme alarm and submissive behaviour. When an otter shows mild submissive behaviour without alarm, usually the head is turned sideways, away from the aggressor.

Posture: The cubs, when approached by the sub-adult, opened their mouths very wide, as wide as possible, and waved their fanned forepaws on either side of their muzzles very rapidly up and down, parallel to but not touching the face. The head is shaken from side to side rapidly. At first I thought they had something stuck in their throat that they were trying to remove. Both screamed continuously, a wavering intimidation scream. The sub-adult female did not show any aggressive behaviour, did not growl but gave friendly chortles and coos – this did not stop the cubs' scream or frantic pawing up and down (for detailed vocalization descriptions see Duplaix, PhD thesis, 1981).

Discussion: I've seen a similar posture in captive *Lutra lutra* and *Lontra longicaudis* in similar circumstances but only lying on the belly and screaming with mouth opened very wide, neck and body pressed against the ground, and without the frantic pawing (Duplaix, PhD thesis, 1981). Similar behaviour has been reported when hand-reared sub-adults are released and approach a wild group that may or may not accept them. An attack by the group may follow, sometimes the 'intruder' is killed, or it is accepted into the group and remains with them (Diane McTurk, pers. comm.).



Head and body pressed to ground

On back – looking up at sub-adult

I have been studying the wild Group K at the Karanambo Ranch in Guyana for two years and they have accepted hand-reared sub-adults in both years: 2001-2002 “Pluto” (male), “Persephone” (female) and in 2002-3 “Rewa” (male). The accepted hand-reared sub-adults participate fully in the group’s activities, baby-sit the cubs and play with and groom other sub-adults and cubs and the adult pair in the group. In 2002, just before or during the rainy season, the ‘intruders’ Pluto and Persephone, were evicted from the group and disappeared. The rainy season has just started in 2003 and I do not know what has happened to Rewa. Has anyone seen similar behaviour in cubs or sub-adults in the wild? I would expect that it would happen when cubs or juveniles meet otters from another group.

Daisy Chain grooming – a new descriptive term



Daisy Chain grooming is observed when *more* than two Giant otters groom each other: one otter grooms another next to it that grooms the other next to it, etc. The otter at the end of the row may be grooming itself. All the otters are usually grooming simultaneously. In the

bottom picture all the otters in the group of seven were grooming simultaneously (one is seen pausing briefly).



REGULARS

The Latest Publications

The PhD thesis of Elke Staib, published in German in 2002 “Okö-ethologie von Riesenottern (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) in Peru”, is currently in the process of being translated into Spanish by the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project, for eventual distribution in South America. Elke Staib and Christof Schenck began their studies in the Manu Biosphere Reserve in 1990. Christof’s thesis was published in 1996 and translated in 1999: “Lobo de Rio (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) - Presencia, uso del habitat y protección en el Peru”.

Forthcoming Events

“11TH WORKSHOP OF AQUATIC MAMMAL SPECIALISTS OF SOUTH AMERICA AND 5TH CONGRESS OF THE LATIN AMERICAN SOCIETY OF AQUATIC MAMMAL SPECIALISTS (SOLAMAC)”, SEPTEMBER 2004.

Location: Cultural Centre of the Pontificia Católica University, Quito Ecuador
Dates: Second week of September, 2004
Organisation: School of Biological Sciences of the Pontificia Católica University of Ecuador (PUCE), Latin American Society of Aquatic Mammal Specialists (SOLAMAC)

The workshops of aquatic mammal specialists of South America (known as RTs) were established with the objective of assembling scientists, conservationists and environmental professionals with an interest in aquatic mammal research, information-sharing, and conservation. The number of participants has increased annually and this congress has transcended the limits of the South American continent, creating interest amongst our colleagues in Central and North America, Europe and Asia. During the last RT (October 2002, Valdivia, Chile), Ecuador was selected unanimously, and for the first time, as the venue for the 11th RT; researchers Cristina Castro and Victor Utreras are responsible for the organisation of the event.

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IXth INTERNATIONAL OTTER COLLOQUIUM, JUNE 2004

The IXth International Otter Colloquium, accompanied by a meeting of the world-wide IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group, will be hosted on the campus of Frostburg State University on 4-10 June 2004. Head of the organising committee is Thomas L. Serfass (Department of Biology, Frostburg State University, Frostburg, MD 21532, e-mail: tserfass@mail.frostburg.edu). The meeting is a truly international event and is expected to be attended by participants from at least 40 countries; the two most recent colloquiums were in Chile and the Czech Republic. The colloquium has not been hosted in North America since 1985 and it is hoped that professionals and others from the continent with an interest in otter biology, ecology, and conservation will be well represented. More information is available at the website <http://otter.frostburg.edu>

The organising committee is currently trying to raise additional funds to assist students/researchers with travel expenses. Although there are no guarantees at this moment that such funding will become available, if you anticipate that you will need financial assistance, contact Lisa Serfass (laserfass@yahoo.com) and your name will be added to the list. Those who are doing presentations or posters will be given priority.

Pepe's Paragraph

Good day, my friends! (As you see, I've quite recovered from my former melancholy). Listen, I've been keeping an eye on all the projects and initiatives you work on throughout South America and they are all fascinating (anything involving us would be!!) But I am really interested to find out if any of you are thinking of carrying out studies to quantify (not just identify) possible threats to our survival. For instance, how much do fishermen really hate us, and why? What about the risk of diseases spreading from pets to us (have you noticed how dogs hardly ever have a bath? Cats are worse! Dirty animals!). Capturing our cubs, killing us for our skin, shooting us for fun or through curiosity, trapping us in nets, or driving over us (I'm determined not to get upset...) – how important are these 'occasional' incidents? What is really the greatest threat? Ignorance? Isolated populations? Mercury contamination? I don't mean to criticise, but it seems to me there is not enough information about the true impact of some of man's activities on our conservation status. Please can you look into this? Thanks and saludos!



Pepe

Comments and written contributions are gratefully received. Please send them to: **Friends of the Giant Otter, Calle 5, No. 131, Dpto. 202, Urb. Los Jasmines, 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 Jessica Groenendijk. The opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily shared by the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project (www.giantotters.com).

