

FRIENDS of the Giant Otter

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Editorial

Well, another very interesting and successful otter colloquium is behind us, and we have a new set of recommendations for future giant otter conservation to work towards. Check out the colloquium report in the Specials section for more details! I was very happy to see that the giant otter was represented by a strong contingent of no less than 17 participants from our research community. Many of us have Tom Serfass and his team, organizers of the conference, to thank for making our participation possible. Now it is time to look ahead and to prepare for the next opportunity to meet and discuss our work; see under Forthcoming Events!!

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PROJECT UPDATES & NEW INITIATIVES

PERU Population census in the Palma Real watershed, Tambopata

Between the 24th of May and the 14th of June, 2004, a population census was carried out by representatives of the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project in the Palma Real watershed, which includes the Patuyacu tributary. Each river was investigated twice, travelling upriver by motor, paddling downriver in an inflatable boat. Sightings and indirect signs were geographically positioned. A total of 9 giant otters were encountered; 1 group of 3 individuals in the headwaters of the Palma Real, 1 group of 2 individuals in the middle reaches of the Palma Real, 1 group of 3 animals in the Patuyacu, and a single individual in the Palma Real Grande (although indirect signs indicated the presence of a group). It proved possible to film the throat markings of only 3 animals, later identified using the throat marking catalogue previously developed for the area.

The two Palma Real groups were less wary of us; it was of these groups that we managed to document the throat markings. Total observation time was 18 minutes. The census was carried out using the standard methodology as described by Groenendijk *et al.* (in prep.). The Neotropical otter (*Lontra longicaudis*) was also observed on both rivers.

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BRAZIL Giant otter diet analysis in the Pantanal

Since March 2002, Projeto Ecolontras is undertaking the project “Pantanal Otters” in the Brazilian Pantanal, with support from the Earthwatch Institute. This project is being carried out at CRI Pantanal (Conservation and Research Initiative) located at Fazenda Rio Negro, a farm that belongs to Conservation International. It aims to acquire data about the ecology and natural history of the giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) and Neotropical otter (*Lontra longicaudis*), which are sympatric in the area.

As a part of this project, we are investigating the diet of both species. Between March 2002 and November 2003, we collected 37 samples from giant otter latrines and 264 feces samples of the Neotropical otter. The preliminary data show that both species are primarily piscivorous, but giant otters prey on larger species and specimens than the Neotropical otter. 100% of giant otter samples included fish and 2,7% included crustaceans while 93,9% of the Neotropical otter samples included fish, 4,28% included crustaceans, 0,7% included snakes and 0,37% included birds.

At this moment, we are working on the identification of fish remnants to the family, genus or species level, using a reference collection and with the help of the team of the Laboratory of Fish of the National Museum. This research will be presented to the Rio de Janeiro University in order to receive the Biological Science Bachelor’s degree.

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SPECIALS

IXth International Otter Colloquium Report

The ninth International Otter Colloquium was held at the Frostburg State University, in Maryland, USA, between June 4-10. More than 200 participants from all over the world gathered to present their work and/or to listen to the experiences of others.

Of particular interest to the giant otter community were a wide variety of presentations, given by Diane McTurk on rehabilitation success of orphaned wild giant otters on the Rupununi River in Guyana; Lisa Davenport on seasonal variation in giant otter diet in oxbow lakes of the Manu National Park, Peru; Paul van Damme on the interaction between fishermen and giant otters in the northeast of Bolivia; Jessica Groenendijk on guidelines for a standardization of giant otter survey methods; Sheila Sykes-Gatz and Volker Gatz on husbandry and management of giant otters in captivity; German Corredor on reproduction behaviour and biology of the giant otter at the Cali Zoo, Colombia; Helen Waldemarin on the ecology of otters in the Rio Negro, Pantanal, Brazil; Nicole Duplaix on variations in types of habitats used by giant otters in the Guianas and current threats to their survival; and Indranee Roopsind on linking giant otters with forests, local people and businesses in IWOKRAMA, Guyana. Posters were presented by Emanuela Evangelista on change of partners in a giant otter alpha couple; Javier Diaz on the presence of the giant otter on the lower Meta River, Colombian Orinoquia; Manoel Muanis on the diet of the Neotropical otter and giant otter in the Pantanal, Brazil; and Keila Matos on whether hydrological management and ways of life threaten the survival of the giant otter in Venezuela.

We also managed to further discuss the range-wide giant otter distribution survey strategy, and to develop continental and species-specific recommendations for the period 2004-2007. The latter are:

- to develop standard survey methodologies for all Latin American otter species and commence implementation, prioritizing range border areas, corridor areas and threatened areas.
- to preferentially support the continuation of existing long-term research projects and to encourage new long-term work.
- to use otters as umbrella/flagship species in the conservation and management of aquatic environments, focusing on advocacy with government authorities and conservation organisations.
- to identify and understand new threats and implement management activities, in cooperation with government authorities and NGOs, to address the known threats.
- to expand education, communication and public awareness activities related to these species among indigenous, local and national stakeholders.
- to strengthen the role of zoos as centres of excellence for otter conservation education, research and *in-situ* conservation support, using management husbandry guidelines, cooperative breeding programmes (studbooks) and effective communication to achieve these aims.
- to encourage communication amongst and identify new OSG collaborators in all countries of Latin America

Specifically for the giant otter it was recommended:

- to continue the assessment of predator-prey relationships, including conflicts with subsistence and commercial fishermen.
- to evaluate the positive and negative impact of tourism in different habitats and implement management guidelines in order to maximize the benefits.
- to encourage the development of a long-term research and conservation project in the Llanos of Venezuela or Colombia.
- to undertake collaborations between field scientists, zoos, and genetic labs to evaluate the potential use of genetic analysis tools in giant otter research.

Finally, it was agreed that Jessica Groenendijk (fzsgop@terra.com.pe) will continue to be the *Pteronura brasiliensis* Species Coordinator for the IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group and that Frank Hajek (also fzsgop@terra.com.pe) will now be the Latin America Coordinator, in place of Gonzalo Medina.

REGULARS

Observations from the Field

Giant otter cub killed by black caiman

A hand-reared and rehabilitated year-old male giant otter (in picture, on left) was attacked and eaten by a large adult black caiman (*Melanosuchus niger*) on the Rupununi River near Karanambu Ranch in southern Guyana. Two cubs were hand-reared at Karanambu last year and were beginning to join another 3 year-old male rehabilitated otter living with a wild group on the river. Both sub-adults frequently followed the male up and down the river. While investigating a caiman, one of the sub-adults was attacked and eaten while the other two otters swam away.

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The Latest Publications

International Giant Otter Studbook & Husbandry and Management Guidelines

The first edition of the International Studbook for the Giant Otter has just been published by Dortmund Zoo. A pdf file with the studbook information as well as a printed copy is available. The studbook is current to December 31, 2003 and contains the data of 339 individual otters that have been kept in zoos since the year 1900. (The first giant otter known to have been kept in a zoo was an individual that lived at the Berlin Zoo in Germany from 1900 to 1908). This document also contains information on reproduction, transfers and longevity of giant otters in zoos.

Some studbook data are still missing. For example, some giant otters that have been kept in zoos are not yet represented in the studbook. Also, although many individuals are known to us, often specific data on their life history is missing or unknown. If you have any information that you would like to contribute to fill in the missing gaps, this would be very much appreciated.

The “International Giant Otter Studbook Husbandry and Management Guidelines 2004/2005” is also available. This manual is approximately 250 pages in length and covers a wide variety of topics. It includes information on enclosure designs and furnishings such as necessary land to water area ratios, substrates, deep digging areas, pool designs, hill designs for natural underground dens, nest box designs etc. It also describes the husbandry practices that are needed to promote successful cub-rearing and to safely introduce animals that are unfamiliar with each other or that have been temporarily

separated. Moreover, information on health problems, vaccinations, reproduction, cub development, parental behaviour, hand rearing cubs, diets, husbandry training and much more, is covered.

Giant otters in captivity are in a critical situation. The status of the current and historical worldwide captive population is presented, as is an overview of the serious problems now faced. Topics covered include census data for this small population, the significant number of animals held singly and in single sex groups, inbreeding problems, a review of the small number of animals that have bred and reared cubs successfully, and inappropriate enclosure conditions that cause health and other problems etc. Possible solutions are presented. It is crucial that all institutions holding giant otters work together to help resolve these problems and create a self-sustaining captive population. This will in turn help conservation efforts for these animals in the wild.

Please contact the international studbook keeper listed below if you would like to receive any of the aforementioned documents. Please also let us know if you have any questions about giant otters in captivity. We look forward to hearing from you!

Sheila Sykes-Gatz

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Giant Otter Rufus digging and grooming in the sand at Dortmund Zoo.



A website just for us!

Here is our very own website www.GiantOtterResearch.com. This website was created to facilitate document exchange and information between all Giant Otter researchers. So many of us are far from libraries and ...each other. As this website develops we will have hard-to-find reports and articles on field research (in English, Spanish and Portuguese) that have been scanned and are in quick-to-download PDF format. For this site to work, I need your help: please send your articles to me to scan and put up on the internet so that students and others can download them. This will save you time and the cost of postage of sending your article reprints far and wide – just refer the person who requests

them to the website. You can also send photographs, maps or any other information you want to share with other researchers. Contact me by email for more details: Dr. Nicole Duplaix NDParis@aol.com.

Forthcoming Events

11th Work Meeting of Specialists on South American Aquatic Mammals and 5th Congress of the Latin American Society of Specialists on Aquatic Mammals (SOLAMAC), 12-17 September 2004, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, Quito, Ecuador. For more information, contact Victor Utreras (vmub@wcsecuador.org), or have a look at: <http://www.puce.edu.ec/zoologia/rtecuador.htm>

VI International Conference on Wildlife Management in Amazonia and Latin America

The National University of the Peruvian Amazon (UNAP), the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology (DICE) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) are very pleased to announce the convening of the VI International Conference on Wildlife Management in Amazonia and Latin America. The conference will be held in the city of Iquitos, capital of the Peruvian Amazon, between the 5th- 10th September, 2004.

The organizers cordially welcome and invite the participation of a wide audience including students, professionals, local communities, NGO's, government representatives and the general public.

Special emphasis during this conference will be on lessons learnt in wildlife conservation and management in Amazonia and Latin America. Discussions and presentations will look at the advances made for conservation, and the lessons learnt in the design, development, implementation, methods, and management plans for wildlife in Amazonia and Latin America.

If you are interested in receiving further information about the conference; submission of abstracts, workshops, and courses; and information on registration and hotels, please visit the conference website at <http://www.vicongreso.com.pe/>. If you have any questions please feel free to contact the conference organisers by e-mail at congresofauna@amauta.rcp.net.pe

Pepe's Paragraph

Dear otterologists! It is rather gratifying to realise how concerned you are for our welfare. Reading the report on the IXth International Otter Colloquium, I was particularly struck by a presentation given by Indranee. I wish I could have been there to listen. Because I happen to believe firmly that raising awareness about our needs and about the many threats we face is especially important amongst the people who share our habitat. And I would urge to carry out education activities particularly with, and for, children, who represent hope for the future and who may help their parents to understand the impact of their actions.



Pepe

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).

