



IOSF HELPING IN IRELAND



Eurasian Otter Photo: A Horner

One of our supporters in Ireland, Bernie Murphy, has been busy working to set up an otter sanctuary on the grounds of the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ISPCA) National Welfare Centre at Longford, Ireland. In April IOSF's Head of Operations, Paul Yoxon, was invited over to give some advice and was delighted to hear that work will soon commence on the new Otter and Wildlife Sanctuary.

The sanctuary will be constructed on a two-acre site and will consist of a small lake, shallower wetland area and landscaped walkways for visitors to observe the wildlife. In recent times otter numbers have been declining in the Midlands area of Ireland and the main reasons for this are pollution, poisoning, shooting and netting on lakes and rivers. The sanctuary will provide a safe environment in a natural wild location for the otters.

Just off the main lake a wetland area will be constructed, which will be an ideal habitat for toads, frogs, damselflies and dragonflies. In recent years, many of the wetlands used by toads and frogs as spawning grounds have been lost due mainly to the harvesting of peat from the bogs, intensive farming and building development. The area will be a marvellous education tool to show the public the value of otter conservation not just for the animals

themselves but also for the general environment and to our own benefit.

And in the future, the centre plans to create facilities to care for injured and orphaned otters.

We will keep you informed.



From left to right Wildlife Trust representative, ISPCA manager Mark Beazley, IOSF member Bernie Murphy and IOSF's Paul Yoxon

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INTERNATIONAL OTTER
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To support IOSF

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Adult £19 • Child £10 • Family £25

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Call 01471 822 487

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A NOTE WHEN WRITING

Could we please ask you to give us
your sponsorship number whenever you
write as it does help us to find your
records more quickly. Thanks.

NEW IOSF PROJECT IN MEXICO

Some time ago IOSF was contacted by Jimena Guerrero, of the Universidad Autonoma Del Estado de Mexico, seeking support for a project on the neotropical otter (*Lontra longicaudis*) in three rivers of Temascaltepec.

This species of otter has a distribution from Mexico to northern Argentina, but it is classified in the IUCN Red List as "Data Deficient". Basically no-one knows the actual size of the populations, how stable they are or exact distribution.

In Mexico, the species has been found from sea level up to 1,700 metres altitude and they usually inhabit rivers, lakes and coastal lagoons. Unfortunately all over Mexico, riparian habitats are constantly being polluted and over-exploited, and this is also the case in the study area. Temascaltepec municipium belongs to the State of Mexico and is a wide area full of forests, rivers and streams. Work has been carried out in this area for 2½ years and

information on food habits and distribution has been obtained.

The next step of the study is to identify which features of the riparian habitat influence not only the distribution but also the abundance of otters within this area. The purpose is to identify areas and/or features which are KEY for otter conservation and start protecting both otters and riparian habitat on the basis of the results.

At the conclusion of this study, it is intended to continue with the conservation and monitoring of otters in this area as well as hopefully expanding to other areas with issues such as pollution, habitat destruction and endangered otter populations. We will keep you informed about progress of this project.

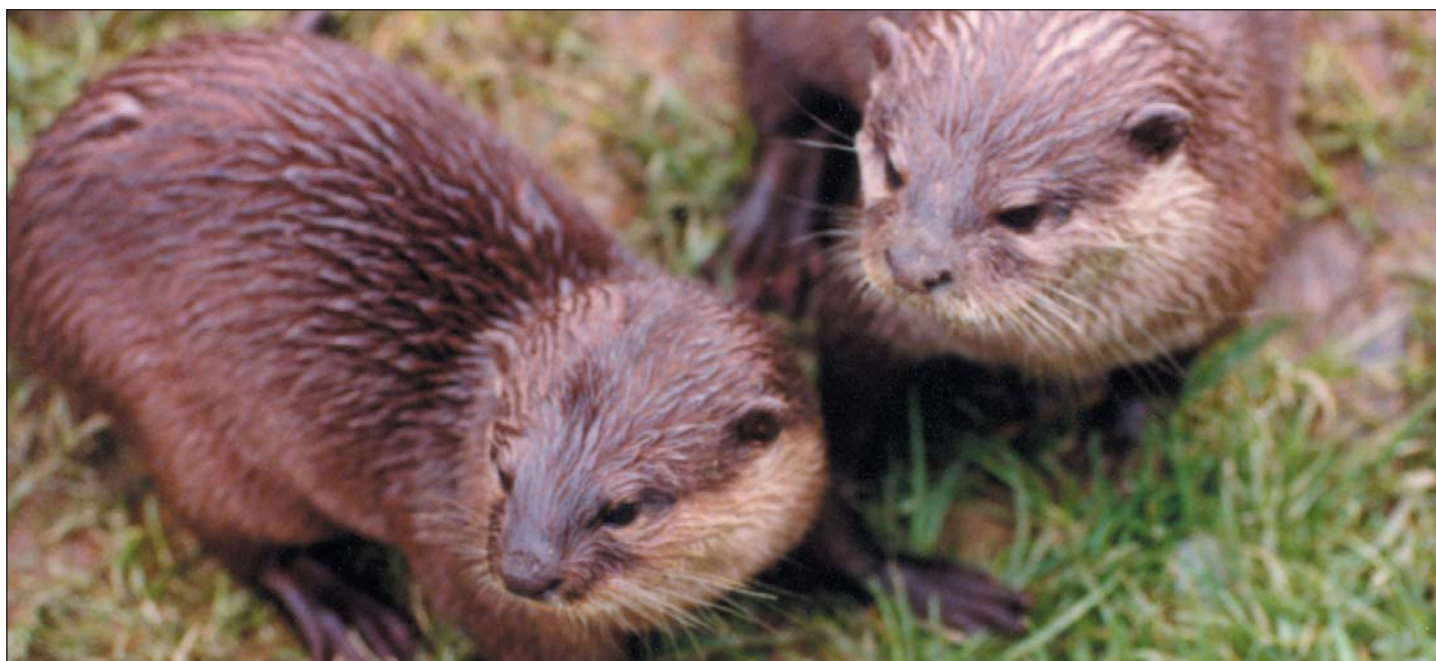
If you would like to donate to support this important work please send a cheque marked "Mexico" on the back – or you can donate on-line just making a note that it is for the Mexico project. Thanks



One of the three Temascaltepec rivers Photo: Jimena Guerrero



STUDY ON ASIAN SHORT-CLAWED OTTER BEHAVIOUR IN ZOOS



Short-clawed Otters in captivity

As part of her degree course in Honours Zoology at Aberdeen University, Samantha Ovenden, carried out a study into the behaviour of Asian short-clawed otters (*Amblonyx cinereus*) in zoos. Here are some excerpts from her study:

Asian short clawed otters are a very sociable species, making them a highly desirable zoo exhibit. They live and move in family groups consisting of an alpha pair and their offspring. In the wild these otters are predominantly nocturnal, however in captivity they seem to adapt well to a more diurnal lifestyle and can appear very playful to the public during the day.

There are two main factors that pose challenges to the welfare of zoo animals: firstly the lack of variability and stimulation in the animals' lives and secondly the presence of human visitors. Despite being a well exhibited species and surviving reasonably well in captivity, it is

not known to what extent these animals are affected by visitor presence - whether by stress or stimulation - or if their boredom can be eliminated through various environmental enrichment strategies. Captivity can be boring for many zoo animals and with otters being among the more active and inquisitive of captive species they are most likely to be affected by boredom.

The behaviour of a group of nine Asian short-clawed otters was observed over a six week period at Edinburgh Zoo. The group consisted of five generations of individuals. One was an adult male, father to all eight others. The rest are all adult females apart from the most recent litter of three - two males and one female, all of which are still pups. Identification of individuals was established before commencement of the study, based on small distinguishing characteristics, for example nose colour and facial features.

The idea that both humans and animals are motivated to interact with one another leads to the question, are the animals more active in the presence of humans or are humans attracted to the animals when they are more active? It is often difficult to distinguish between positive and negative effects as animals will engage in different behaviours in the presence of humans whether they are stressed or not.

Various methods of environmental enrichment have achieved success in decreasing stereotypic or abnormal behaviours and therefore improving captive animal welfare. However in the zoo environment boredom and routine are not the only factors that have effects on animal's daily lives.

More can be found on her website at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/~u02sro2/>



OTTERS IN CARE

Since we last wrote we have had such a rollercoaster of emotions from the high of releasing another otter back to the wild to the pits of seeing a strong young male otter reduced to a ghost by a vicious snare. And we have also had four young cubs from various parts of Scotland, two survived and two did not.

Just one day later we were called out by our local Countryside Ranger, John Phillips, for an otter with a serious injury to his neck, which was beside a public footpath to the main pier in Broadford. Unfortunately when we got there the otter went into the water and swam away. However it reappeared near to the old pier and we were able to corner

it and catch it there. Poor soul he was in a terrible condition.

We took him straight to our vet, Alan, who quickly sedated him and removed the snare. The snare had clearly been on for a long time and not only was the wound horrific but he had lost a lot of body weight, presumably because he hadn't been able to hunt. Alan cleaned him up and put on a dressing and we took him back to our hospital to be cared for.

He slept the rest of that day and most of the next before waking up with quite an appetite. He improved so much that we began to have hopes that he might survive in spite of this, but sadly no, he died on the Sunday.

What disgusting devices snares are. The snare used was a legal non-locking snare but it made no difference as it just cut deep into the neck. Snares can be set legally for foxes but they will also catch otters, badgers, domestic pets – anything.

We have been in contact with our local Police Wildlife Liaison Officer, PC Tom Owen, who has been



Thistle release photo: IOSF

Thistle was released back to the wild on 8 May, which was a beautiful sunny Highland spring morning – we haven't actually had many of those so it stands out! Thistle had always been a bit awkward but on this particular morning he co-operated perfectly. His release cage was put into the pen and it didn't take him too long to venture in.

His release site was a lovely river with wooded banks – perfect. As we opened the door and waited for him to leave a fish jumped just to prove that dinner was ready! It didn't take him long to leave the cage and he ventured straight into the water twisting and twirling in that wonderful way that otters do. We watched for a long while before retreating, leaving him to enjoy his new freedom.



Sith at croft pen photo: IOSF



OTTERS IN CARE

extremely helpful. We have also been trying to raise awareness about this appalling case through the press and we will be looking into campaigning with other organisations to have snares banned altogether. We will contact you for your help on this.

Back in March we were shocked to hear of the death of Honey. As you know, she had been tamed by some idiot so could never go back to the wild, so she was being cared for in her own private pen with a lake down in south-west England. Near to her enclosure flowed a river with wild otter so she had visits from other otters from time to time.



Lelly photo: IOSF

Somehow she had managed to damage her teeth and while the vet was seeing to these she arrested and died. A post mortem revealed a heart condition but we don't know if she was born with this or developed it. Sadly, Honey should have spent her short life in the wild but that was never to be.

As well as all this there have been the new cubs.

The young cub which had just arrived at the time of the last Newsletter is now called "Heather". She had been found by Rob Dewar, Ranger at the National Trust for Scotland Inverewe

Gardens and weighed a mere 770g! She was an absolutely gorgeous bundle of fluff but was soon tucking into fish on her own - I think she basically didn't have the patience to wait to be fed so thought she'd better help herself! Rob also told us that at least three otters have been hit on the road in the last four years not far from where she was found so IOSF will be working with NTS to try and get wildlife warning reflectors put up at the site.

Both Heather and Sith are now in the croft pens, where they have a nice large area to explore.

Four other young cubs have since arrived. One came from the Isle of Harris, but unfortunately she died suddenly - the post mortem showed that she had hepatitis, which was a grave concern as she had been showing no signs of illness.

Another cub was found near Portree by people clearing their garden. She was so tiny - smaller than the toy cubs we have and weighing less than 600g. Sadly she didn't make it either.

But the last two, Lelly and Tweed, are doing fine. When you lose cubs like this you become even more anxious in the early stages and these two were watched like a hawk for any slight problem. Both of these cubs came from the Scottish Borders but they are not related.

Lelly has been named after a member of ours Lesley McCulloch (nicknamed Lelly), who was tragically killed in a car crash a short while ago - she was only 26. Her fiancée Mike Thirlwell contacted us as he wanted to continue her support of otters and he asked if an otter could be named after her as otters had become her passion since visiting a local animal park back in the mid nineties. She had been mesmerized by the funny, cheeky, playful behaviour - characters which Mike tells me she shared! Mike has shared a lot with me about Lelly and although we never met I can tell she was a special person. She has now lives on in a fiery little otter called Lelly.



Lelly photo: M. Thirlwell

Lelly is very protective of her friend Tweed, who is a male from yes, you guessed it, the River Tweed! We are delighted to say that we now have a webcam on their pen so you can see the two of them playing together or sleeping in the hay. Just log on to the website (www.otter.org) and click on the link to see their fun.

And news from abroad. Some of you may remember our friend Shelanne from Canada, who reared several river otters which were successfully



Tweed photo: IOSF

released in March 2005. Back in February, I received an email from her saying that she believes she has seen one of her otters, a female otter called Jabber Jabber. Not far from the release site surfers are encountering an otter which seems to like their surf board leashes, and as Jabber Jabber did like to play with various "toys" it could well be her.



ALARMING TRADE IN OTTER FURS



Otter skin Photo: Nguyen Xuan Dang

A while ago IOSF received an email asking if we could supply otter skins – you can imagine our reaction to that! We followed this up but the company information is pretty vague and as it is based outwith the EU and the pelts might indeed have been legal, we were unable to do much.

Following on from this we have been getting more and more reports about the fur problem starting with an article in the Times of India News Network on 29 September 2005. The problem seems to be particularly bad in Tibet where otter furs form part of the national dress, the chuba. Otter furs are for sale everywhere in Tibet but Belinda Wright, executive director of the Wildlife Protection Society of India was particularly shocked at a young man wearing a chuba decorated with six otter heads! She said "I was aware that along with tiger and leopard skins, the otter pelt too is much in demand. But I was shocked by the magnitude of the trade."

The otter is known as "Udbilao" or "Pani ka Kutta" in parts of north India but unlike the tiger and leopard it is regarded as "nobody's child" and no-one seems to be concerned for its conservation, even though it is endangered and highly protected. However, this protection appears to be on paper only as there is no programme for REAL protection.

In Linxia a town in China, a total of 1,833 otter skins were openly for sale, all for use on the chuba. In

the Bharkor area of old Lhasa alone, 305 otter skin chubas were on sale. So you can see the scale of the problem.

It is estimated that at least 50% of these skins are from India, but skins from Pakistan, Turkey and Afghanistan are also highly valued. Otters have vanished from Kashmir's Wular Lake area and Uttaranchal and due to poaching, otters in India have been reduced to a few hundred in isolated pockets and they are rarely seen outside protected areas. The pelts may be smuggled out in fake gasoline tanks.

The fur problem is not confined to Tibet or even neighbouring countries and it involves different species of otter skin, some apparently obtained through legitimate means e.g. American river otter skins. Sea otter skins are also being sought and in Alaska there is now a big market for otter furs destined for Asian markets.

We also received an email from Andreas Kranz in Austria recently, which said that during the severe winter in the Danube Delta the channels and lakes were frozen, which made it very easy to kill otters using dogs. In one village a man collected 120 otter furs which were then exported to Turkey and then probably on to Tibet. The Danube Delta was surveyed very carefully this March and hardly any otter signs were found at all – this is an area which has been studied over a number of years so there is a lot of background information on otter

numbers. A similar situation was found in the Ukraine part of the Danube Delta last October.

Unfortunately it appears that fur fashion is going through a stage of revival – can you believe such a thing? And in Tibet it is also a symbol of status and cultural identity. The Dalai Lama is against the use of animal furs and made a public appeal in January 2006 to stop using wildlife products. Since then there have been incidents of the burning of stockpiles of wildlife skins in some monasteries but the Chinese have banned such events as they see it as a public demonstration of allegiance to the Dalai Lama.

IOSF has been in contact with CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) which is an international agreement between Governments and whose aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. We have been advised to make a presentation to the Standing Committee which is concerned with the illegal trade. So currently we are preparing this presentation, with the help of Jim Conroy, our Scientific Adviser and Chairman of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Otter Specialist Group. We are also working with Prof Padma da Silva, our Asian co-ordinator, and Debbie Banks of the Environmental Investigation Agency.

We will keep you up to date with this crucial issue and will be asking for your help. In the meantime if you would like to donate towards the costs of preparing this presentation please send a cheque marked "Furs" or alternatively make a donation on-line, again identifying "Furs" as the purpose of your donation. Many thanks – we all need to work together on this as it could have disastrous implications for so many different species of otter in many parts of the world.



TRAINING WORKSHOP ON SURVEY TECHNIQUES AND MONITORING OTTER POPULATIONS IN ROYAL CHITWAN NATIONAL PARK, NEPAL



The participants of the training workshop at Chitwan (some are not present) Photo: Dr S.A. Hussain

Padma K de Silva, our Asian Co-ordinator, recently invited us to attend a workshop in Nepal. Padma is also Asian Co-ordinator for the IUCN/SSC Otter Secretariat and here is her report.

The Asian Section of the IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group conducted a training workshop on "Survey techniques and monitoring otter populations" in Royal Chitwan National Park, Nepal from 7-9 March 2006. The local organising was done by "The Integrated Group for Environment and Research" (TIGER), Nepal. The major objective of the workshop was to train a few interested Nepalese wildlife biologists in otter survey techniques so that they can carry out otter surveys in the wetlands of Nepal, where there is very little information on otters at all except the presence of the three species, smooth coated otter, Eurasian otter and small clawed otter.

Fourteen local participants attended the training programme. The resource persons were invited

from neighbouring countries such as India, Sri Lanka and from Nepal itself. Unfortunately, the invitees from Netherlands and Scotland were unable to participate due to the prevailing political unrest in the country and the very limited funds available restricted inviting more resource persons from other countries.

The first Technical Session of the programme dealt with the general status of the wetlands in Nepal with special reference to otter. The next session went on to describe and discuss the otter survey methods in detail using data which already exists to demonstrate various analytical methods in studying the otter populations in the wild. The rest of the time was fully allocated for field exercises along the bank of the Rapti River, flowing through the National Park, where intense search was carried out for otter signs such as spraints, footprints and the habitat of otters.

Participants made several important recommendations which are very significant for otter

conservation in Nepal eg. illegal trade of otter skins from Nepal through Tibet to China. These recommendations would be forwarded to His Majesty's Government of Nepal for consideration for implementing.

The Columbus Zoo Organization, Ohio, US sponsored the workshop. The International Otter Survival Fund (IOSF), Scotland, Otter Park, Aqualutra, Netherlands and the Houston Zoo Organization, Houston, US were the co-sponsors for which the IUCN/SSC Asian co-ordinator of the OSG who organised the workshop is very grateful.

We are delighted to have been able to help with this workshop – as we have already said it is crucial that everyone works together to conserve otters and with regard to the fur problem the scientists at this workshop are the ones who are closest to the problem.



NEWS OF OTTERS

Otters in Belgium

IOSF recently received an email from a campsite in Belgium which is on the River Semois. Apparently otters are regularly being seen there, which is very good news as otters are extremely scarce in Belgium. IOSF have contacted our Belgian colleagues who are checking the reports. Anyone interested in visiting the campsite should look at: www.campingdelasemois.com

Otter recovers from likely white shark attack

The Monterey Bay Aquarium has released an adult male sea otter which has fully recovered from extensive orthopaedic surgery to repair bones in his forelimb - bones likely to have been broken by a white shark.

During the surgery Dr Jim Roush, a veterinary surgical specialist from Royal Oaks, attached small surgical steel plates to each broken bone. This is believed to be the first operation of this kind ever performed on a sea otter.

Monterey Bay press release 6 April 2006

Thanks

We are always grateful to everyone for their help but this time we would like to make a special mention of two supporters.

Verity Hunt-Sheppard sent us a donation for £40 from sales she had made on ebay. She is hoping to list items all year round and will again donate the funds to IOSF. This is a brilliant idea so why not check her items - her selling name is "otter conservation".

Young Corrie Wilson came up with a guaranteed way to make money - charge his friends and family to use the loo! Needless to say he was bound to get donations and when he visited us on Skye he brought £32 to buy fish for the otters. Unfortunately, as you can see, when he was here it was still very much winter and although he was trying to put a brave face on it he was frozen posing for this photo!

'Jurassic Beaver' find stuns experts

The discovery in Inner Mongolia, China, of a new, remarkably preserved fossil of a beaver-like mammal that lived 164 million years ago is shaking palaeontologists' understanding of early mammals. The animal, which has been named *Castorcauda lutasimilis*, looks as if it was put together from pieces of platypus, river otter, and beaver. It was nearly half a metre long and weighed about half a kilogram, making it the largest mammal ever found in the Jurassic Period (from 200 million to 145 million years ago) - until now the early mammals were believed to be small shrew-like creatures.

This fossil also has the oldest fur ever found with both guard hairs and underfur - just like the otter. The animal was semi-aquatic and had webbed feet and teeth specialised for catching fish, but had a flattened beaver-like tail and possibly lived like a modern platypus, digging a tunnel to nest and lay eggs, and going from the tunnel into the water to feed.

Science vol 311, p 1123

These are just two ideas for fundraising - let us know if you have any other novel ideas.



HOW YOU CAN HELP IOSF

There are many ways you can help IOSF but if you are in America you can donate to IOSF tax free, just go to www.cafamerica.com.

If you are thinking of making your will, please consider making a bequest for otter conservation through IOSF.

For more information on this go to www.otter.org/legacy.html

New otter record in Israel

In February, IOSF received an otter record from Ashkelon in Israel. The otters were seen in an urban area 500 metres from the sea. We passed the information on to our colleagues working in Israel who will be confirming the report.

OTTER NEWS ON PDF

Help IOSF to put more money into otter conservation by reading your OtterNews online.

If you are happy to do this please email us at otterHQ@aol.com quoting your sponsorship number, and reduce our printing and postage costs. However, if you prefer, we are still happy to send out a printed copy to you.

Your OtterNews is now printed on 80% recycled paper.



In memoriam

We were sorry to hear the news that Maureen Shuker died on Christmas Eve 2005. Maureen had been supporting us since 1995 and had been very active in helping us. She not only loved otters, but all animals and regularly fed her local badgers - a family custom which is being kept up by her daughter, Sarah. We would like to pass on our best wishes to all Maureen's friends and family.

Another sad loss was Pat Cownie whose daughter, Jane, sent some pictures taken by her Mum. These were photos of her toy otter cub in various locations, and with Jane's permission we shall be printing some of these in a future Newsletter.