



Smooth Coated Otter

Factsheet: (014.10.03)

Introduction

Otters belong to the order Carnivora and are semi-aquatic members of the family Mustelidae. Thirteen species of otters exist in the world but only two are found in Pakistan; the Smooth coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) and the Common or Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*). Smooth-coated otter is known as Ludhar in Punjabi, Ludhro in Sindhi and Oodh Balao in Urdu.

Habitat and Social Grouping

The Smooth-coated otter is an amphibious mammal that lives in freshwater wetlands, such as rivers, canals and lakes. They breed throughout the year and live in family groups consisting of an alpha male and female with cubs of first two generations; Individuals older than a year find some mate from some other family and start new family group.

Feeding Habits

The Smooth-coated otter is among top carnivore species of wetlands and forages largely in freshwater habitats. It is mainly a fish eater and its diet comprises of amount 95% fish. It also feeds on rodents, frogs, freshwater prawns, larger spiders and birds.

Significance

The Smooth-coated otter is regarded as an indicator of a wetland's health as it is very sensitive to any changes in the food chain. These otters are also very sensitive to deteriorated water quality, toxicity and disturbances. Being at the top of the food chain in their specific habitats, otters are among the first species to disappear when their environment is contaminated by pollutants such as heavy metals and organochlorines like Poly Chlorinated Biphenyls.

Distribution and Status in Sindh

The Smooth-coated otter was found along Indus River in Sindh, major parts of Nara Canal and many freshwater lakes. Today however its number have been greatly reduced and the species can be found only in fragmented habitats in scattered populations. In a recent study under the *Indus for All Programme* funded Otter Conservation Project implemented by Sindh Wildlife Department, its existence was confirmed in 11 districts in Sindh including; 1. Kashmore-at-Kandhkot. 2. Ghotki. 3. Sukkur. 4. Qambar-Shehdadkot. 5. Khairpur. 6. Nawab Shah. 7. Sanghar. 8. Jamshoro. 9. Badin. 10. Thatta. 11. Mir Pur Khas. In 1972 it was awarded protected status under the Sindh Wildlife Protection Act. Capturing or hunting the otter is illegal in Pakistan.



Reasons for Decline

The major factor responsible for the decline of this species is hunting for their pelts which are greatly valued in countries such as Nepal, China and Russia and fetch high prices. Coats or cloaks made out of otter pelt are regarded as a sign of the wearer's wealth and prestige. Fishermen and fish farmers also hunt otter as they are perceived as a threat to fish stocks. Other factors for the otter's decline include habitat degradation and human incursion. Although they are diurnal animals but continuous human incursion into their habitats has caused them to adopt nocturnal behaviour.

Recommendations for Otter Conservation in Sindh

1. Enforcement of Wildlife Laws

The Sindh Wildlife Protection Act 1972 provides protection to all wild animals but its implementation is weak. The most important step for otter conservation in Sindh is the effective implementation of this Act.

2. Training of Wildlife Staff

The Sindh Wildlife Department is under staffed and lacks adequate resources to fulfill its mandate. Institutional strengthening of the Department is required both in terms of training and equipment.

3. Creation of Otter Sanctuaries

An area should be declared as an Otter Sanctuary from the identified potential otter sites. All hunting, fishing and other anthropogenic activities should be prohibited in this area so that otters are able to live and propagate in natural environment.

4. Restoration of Otter Habitats

One of the main reasons for the declining otter population is habitat loss due to cutting of vegetation (Typha) for making mats, burning of older vegetation to have fresh vegetation for livestock, pollution of water bodies and extensive fishing in otter habitats. Controlled cutting of Typha, controlled fishing and avoiding polluting water bodies can improve otter habitats and their populations.

5. Awareness Raising

In addition to the value of otter pelts, there are other misconceptions among the local population about the medicinal value of the otter's various body parts. This provided an incentive for otter hunting. In all the cases of otter hunting, usually the otter pelt is taken while rest of the body is wasted. It is necessary to dispel these misconceptions and inform people about the value of this species and its important ecological role in the wetland ecosystem.

6. Community based Otter Conservation

The involvement of local communities in otter conservation is very important in the long term. Community based otter conservation initiatives should include incentives to the community for conserving the species such as alternate livelihood and income generation options.

Conclusion

The smooth coated otter is an important component of wetland ecology. It ensures healthy fish stock by eating weak and diseased fish and prevents the transfer of diseased DNA to next generations of diseased DNA. It is also an indicator of pollution in wetlands. If efforts are not made for the otter's conservation we may lose this species forever.

Indus for All Programme

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