

INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

Experts demand strict breeding plan for otter conservation

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The smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata sindica*), once present in large numbers around major lakes in Sindh, is now limited only to the Nara Valley, report wildlife conservationists.

However, conservationists from other areas report that the otter population has increased along the Chotiari reservoir, Sanghar district because the sand dunes and green pastures are a safe haven for the animal.

Local Wildlife Conservationist and Writer Amar Leghari, the author of four books on wildlife, environment and folklore, claimed that the population of otter at present exists only at Baqar Lake, Chotiari Reservoir, Nara valley. He criticised the Sindh Wildlife Department (SWD) officials, who instead of taking strict measures for its breeding, have displayed the water animal at famous Haleji Lake picnic resort. He insisted that a strict plan is urgently needed for the otters breeding in order to save the indigenous specie.

The total population of the smooth-coated otter over the 25 sites was estimated to be around 178. Hunting for fur, habitat degradation, increasing water pollution and weak enforcement of wildlife laws, have significantly reduced their population. Meanwhile, activists from the area explained that the lack of greenery and wide tropical rainforests have also affected the population.

Speaking about the endangered species, one activist remarked that perhaps the recent otter death in a road accident some time ago may, in all likelihood, have been the last otter of the area.

A survey conducted two years ago by the SWD and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-Pakistan, Indus for All Programme, jointly confirmed the existence of otters at 25 sites in 11 districts of Sindh. When contacted, SWD officials were unsure about its existence but said "its small population exists at major lakes of the province, including the Keenjhar Lake".

Pakistan is home to two species of otters: the smooth-coated otter and Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*). The latter exists in the northern mountainous region while the smooth-coated otter mostly inhabits Sindh, Punjab and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. The sub species, found particularly along the Indus River, has been referred to as the 'Sindh otter' (*Lutrogale perspicillata sindica*). It is known as Ludhro in Sindhi.

Furthermore, activists explained that, while there may have been a small number of otters at one side of the Keenjhar Lake in the past, however, they have received no news of their existence anymore.

Some wildlife conservationists added that owners of fish farms in Thatta and Badin districts have also killed a large number of species, as these fish ponds attracted otters. However, guards deputed at the fish ponds, usually killed a large number of the animals on the spot in complete violation of the laws against hunting.

The survey report said that five sites located in four different districts were identified where an otter population exists throughout the year, whereas otters visited all other sites occasionally over different seasons in search of food.

The decline in otter population despite the presence of the Sindh Wildlife Protection Ordinance 1972 suggested that the ordinance may not be effective and there have been setbacks in the implementation of the wildlife laws. Poor law enforcement due to various reasons such as the lack of trained staff and funds has contributed to the otter decline in the study area.

