Asian Otter Conservation Network

In December we told you about the workshop in Bangladesh and that one of the priorities identified was to look for the Eurasian otter, which hasn’t been seen there since 1995. We have just heard from Prof Feeroz that they are planning a survey for this species in the north of the country next month, following reports from two students given at the end of the workshop. It is so positive to see that action is already being taken.

At the workshop a Bangladesh Otter Network was set up like the Indonesian Network formed in 2013. In Bangladesh we talked with our Asian friends and agreed that it would be useful to have other country networks and to bring them together under one umbrella network for Asia. We have now been in touch with colleagues working on otters in various Asian countries and as a result they are forming networks in Pakistan, India, Cambodia and Nepal and hopefully a Thai network will also be formed.

These countries will all be linked under the Asian Otter Conservation Network, and we are delighted to say that Prof Padma de Silva, from Sri Lanka, has agreed to Chair this network. Padma has been working on otters for many years now and her experience, particularly in education in Asia, will be invaluable in taking the network forward.

The aim of the Asian Otter Conservation Network is to enable workers in each country to collaborate and share knowledge and experience and also prioritise future research and community work. We believe it is vital that it is local researchers in Asia who carry out this work and by bringing them together they will become a stronger force to the benefit of the otters. IOSF will act as administrators and co-ordinators of the Asian Network.

African Otter Training Workshop

There are three species of otter in sub-Saharan Africa - spotted-necked (*Lutra maculicollis*), African clawless (*Aonyx capensis*) and Congo clawless (*Aonyx congicus*). All three are listed in the IUCN Red List and in 2012 they were upgraded to “Near Threatened” from “Least Concern”, but this has not been upgraded yet on the IUCN Red List website. Even this listing creates a false impression that populations have recovered while there are strong reasons to suspect their population numbers continue to decline, largely due to increasing human population. Indeed, the situation of otters in Africa is far from being good, and some populations will be extinct before anyone even knows of their existence.
The workshops in Asia have been such a success that we feel that it is now time to take this concept to Africa to develop otter conservation throughout the continent. As in Asia there are very few people working on otters in Africa and so a workshop is planned to take place in July in Tanzania. This will take place at the College of African Wildlife Management Mweka, which is the only training institution in the region. Mweka has trained over 5,000 wildlife managers from 52 countries worldwide (28 African countries and 24 other countries in the world) and by holding the workshop here we can encourage the College to incorporate training in otter work in their general curriculum for students from throughout Africa. This will therefore have far-reaching effects which will be ongoing.

We are working closely with Jan Reed-Smith of the African Otter Outreach Project (AoTOP), who has considerable experience in otter work in Africa. We are also working with the Tanzania National Parks Authority (TANAPA, www.tanzaniaparks.com), the Tanzania Wildlife Research Institute (TAWIRI, www.tawiri.or.tz/) and the Tanzania Fisheries Research Institute (TAFIRI, www.tafiri.go.tz).

Participants will come from all over sub-Saharan Africa, including Benin, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda, and several people including rangers and National Park ecologists have already expressed an interest. Through these people national networks can be formed and linked through an African Otter Conservation Network, as we have done in Asia.

**Otter Holt Building in Camden** (Photo: Ruth Ewan)

We were delighted to be invited to take part in an event at Camden Arts Centre, building an artificial otter holt as part of an art exhibition – certainly something different for us to do!

During the French Revolution they devised a new calendar with each day having its own special symbol – a plant, animal, agricultural implement, etc. And 12th August was the day of the otter!

Ruth Ewan is preparing an exhibition based on the calendar called “Back to the Fields”, with something to represent each day’s symbol. So rather than just having a photo of an otter she wanted local people to be involved in the construction of an artificial holt which would be included in the exhibition.
About 35 people of all ages came on the afternoon, which was introduced by Paul with a brief talk on otters, aimed largely at the children. There were various ottery activities including games and mask making, but of course the highlight was building the holt. Logs and pipes had been provided but we raided the garden for twigs, leaves and dry grass. The end result looked quite impressive, although it would clearly have to be more substantial if a real otter was to use it!

You can see the holt as part of the exhibition from 30 January-29 March – more information at www.camdenartscentre.org

A Date for Your Diary

International Otter Awareness Day 2015 will be held on Wednesday 27 May and this year we want to make it bigger and better – we really want people to hear and know about otters and how important it is to conserve them.

Did you know that 9 of the 13 species of otter are declining in the world? This is why it is vital that we get the word out and make people realise how endangered they are.

You can play a vital role. If you want ideas for fundraising go to http://www.otter.org/raiseFundsForUs.aspx

But there are lots of other things you can do to help:

• Tell your friends and family about otters and how serious things are.
• Ask your library if you can put information or a poster there – we can supply template posters that you can fill in.
• Approach your local newspaper to see if they will run an article.
• Let us have contacts for your local media so that we can add them to our list to receive press releases.

We really appreciate anything you can do to help but if you do plan to have an event please let us know so that we can publicise it on our Events page on the website.

News from the Hospital

Some of you will have been following the progress of the otters on our blog and will have seen that we have just received a young cub from the Borders. This little one was found in a motor parts store in Galashiels and taken to Arthurshiel Animal Rescue Centre (http://www.arthurshielrescuecentre.co.uk/) at St Boswells. In 2009, Shona brought us another young cub, Orla, who was released the following year, so she knew what she was taking on with this youngster. It was quite touch and go for a while as the cub had been alone for some time, but with plenty of TLC, it was soon ready to travel to Skye.

We had a very small window of weather between two periods of wind and snow and so we met up at Dalwhinnie for the transfer. All went well and the cub is now tucked up in a cub unit and eating well. As you can see it isn’t easy to get photos:
Tarka and Saoirse had quite a traumatic time during our winds at the beginning of the month, when gusts reached 109mph on Skye! There are two sleeping boxes in their enclosure but for some reason they only ever slept in one and would eat in the other. Fortunately it was the “dining room” which took off and flew around the enclosure - thank goodness they were tucked up in the other one, but it was certainly a stressful time for them. The latches on the door also came loose so we had to move them into another enclosure to make sure they didn’t go AWOL! They have now settled down again thank goodness.

Delilah decided she didn’t like using the door to her sleeping box. There is an inspection hatch in the top and she insisted on pushing it off and coming out of there instead. That would have been ok but it meant that all the rain was getting into her bedding. I would fix it back on and as soon as my back was turned she would push it off again. So in the end Paul had to fix it on permanently so she can’t get it off. It does mean we can only see her when she comes out but at least we know she is warm and dry.

All three of them have been very busy though. As there is no long grass for them to
collect in the enclosures we leave fresh hay for them and it is great fun hiding and watching them grab mouthfuls and run back into their box!

*If you would like to support our cubs in the Sanctuary you can send a cheque marked "Hospital" on the back or make a donation online at [www.ottershop.co.uk](http://www.ottershop.co.uk)*

**IUCN World Parks Congress 2014**

At the end of last year, IOSF took part in the IUCN World Parks Congress 2014, which was entitled “Poaching from Parks: combating wildlife crime in protected areas”. This event immediately followed the IUCN World Leaders’ Dialogue on ‘The Nature of Crime – the extent and impact of illegal wildlife trade’. It was held in Sydney, Australia, and although we couldn’t take part in person we were able to send over a display based on our 2014 report into the Illegal Trade in Otters.

This opportunity came about because of our membership of the Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking (CAWT) and it clearly demonstrates the value of such collaboration with other organisations with similar objectives. The event showcased organisations, protected areas and people involved in the prevention and prosecution of wildlife crime, together with international tools and efforts to combat wildlife trafficking from the world’s parks. The escalation in wildlife poaching, particularly by organised criminal groups, is an unprecedented challenge for park managers and enforcement officers around the world. In 2013 at least 60 park rangers were murdered by poachers and many more were injured.

Wildlife trafficking is estimated to be the fourth largest global crime and protected areas are the prime target for poachers – this, of course, includes otters. Poachers are becoming more brazen in their attempts to obtain and smuggle wildlife from parks and protected areas. They are also becoming better equipped (with GPS tracking devices, high calibre weapons, helicopters and night vision equipment) and more violent in their pursuit of profits.

Poaching from parks can only be addressed effectively through the collaboration of people involved in combating wildlife trafficking and the protection and management of protected areas. All too often otters are overlooked as the main concern is for the high profile species, such as elephants and tigers. It is therefore vital that we ensure that otters are included in these events so that people come to realise the threat to otter numbers worldwide.

For more information on CAWT go to [http://www.cawtglobal.org/wildlife-crime/](http://www.cawtglobal.org/wildlife-crime/)
Illegal Trade Updates

In addition to the World Parks Congress, there are a number of other positive initiatives which we can report this month and there are signs that things are beginning to change in China.

In December, TRAFFIC and the World Customs Organization (WCO) held a seminar at Ruili in China, on the use and training of wildlife detector dogs. The aim is to expand the number of these dogs in use in Asia and to increase the range of products they can detect. Customs officials came from Russia, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong SAR, Vietnam, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, and of course China. There is also a European Commission scheme to establish detector dog programmes throughout EU Member States. (http://www.traffic.org/home/2015/1/7/meeting-to-expand-the-role-of-wildlife-detector-dogs-in-asia.html)

More positive news is that the New Era Health Group has become the first State-owned Chinese company to include a zero tolerance policy towards the use and gifting of illegal and endangered wildlife products. Their Code of Conduct for employees now includes a commitment that “consumption and procurement of illegal and endangered wildlife products, including but not limited to business banquets and gifts, is not permitted.” The company has also committed to raise public awareness about this issue and biodiversity conservation and resource sustainability within other State-owned enterprises and the direct-selling industry. It is hoped that other companies will soon follow this example.
http://www.traffic.org/home/2015/1/13/new-era-health-group-makes-formal-commitment-not-to-tolerate.html

You will know that IOSF is a partner of WildLeaks (www.wildleaks.org), the world’s first wildlife crime whistleblower initiative, which allows people to report wildlife crime anonymously so that action can be taken. We were delighted to hear from Andrea Crosta, Founder and Project Leader, that WildLeaks has just been celebrated in the 2014 Nominet Trust 100 (www.nominettrust.org.uk). The Nominet Trust is the UK’s only dedicated “Tech for Good” funder, and projects featured on the list are recognised for their use of technology to tackle some of the world’s biggest social problems from education and human rights abuses to climate change and health. WildLeaks was selected by an independent steering committee “in recognition of its
innovative use of the state-of-the-art Tor encryption to stem the vast illegal trade in endangered species and protected timber.”

Andrea told us “We are thrilled that WildLeaks has made the Nominet Trust 100 2014 and proud that we’ve been recognized as a Tech for Good pioneer seeking to change the world with technology and an innovative approach. Our first priority is to facilitate the identification of criminals and corrupt governmental officials behind the poaching and trafficking of endangered species without forgetting the associated human toll. We also put a lot of effort into protecting the people who choose to send us information, not only by providing a state-of-the-art secure system but also by managing and using the information in the correct way”.

IOSF is delighted to be working with WildLeaks so that more cases of wildlife crime involving otters can be detected and the offenders identified and prosecuted. Remember if you wish to report any suspicion of wildlife crime go to www.wildleaks.org and you can rest assured that you will remain anonymous.

And Now For The Bad News …
We are all encouraged by news telling us that more effort is being put into combating the illegal wildlife trade – this has to be good for otters, which are such a large part of the trade.

But then we hear that two states in America are planning to bring back otter trapping. In both Indiana and Pennsylvania the number of otters became so low that they had to bring in a reintroduction programme. NOW they are saying that they were so successful in this that they need to “control” them again by trapping. With all the other pressures on otters, such as habitat loss, this will no doubt result in a similar drastic drop in numbers followed by another reintroduction programme! They just don’t seem to learn from past mistakes.

In Indiana, the Natural Resources Commission has approved rules allowing a “limited” river otter trapping season although this still has to be officially “signed off”, which of course will happen. This means that they will start to kill otters this autumn in 66 counties with each licensed trapper allowed up to two otters per season. The season will be from 15 November-15 March and there will be an annual limit of 600 otters for the state.

In Pennsylvania, the Board of Game Commissioners has just given preliminary approval to renewing otter trapping in the north east of the state. The season would begin in February 2016 and initially would only be for three days with an option for the Game Commission to extend it by five days. Licensed trappers would be allowed one otter per season but at this stage they have not said how many licensed trappers there are!
The IUCN guidelines for “harvesting” any species say that this must be sustainable, and yet we cannot find any precise data on how many otters there are in either state. When we have made enquiries to Indiana we have been sent a meaningless map showing distribution in terms of “rare”, “uncommon”, “common”, and “abundant” but there is no definition as to what these terms actually mean. So if you don’t know how many you have, how can you say that this is sustainable?

Of course, we are completely against the killing of otters, but if countries like America do not keep to guidelines issued by bodies like IUCN, then how can we expect poorer countries in Asia to do it?

We are sad to say that the IUCN Otter Specialists Group (OSG) is not willing to stand up against this, and this is why we personally resigned from the Group. Of course, there are people within the Group who totally agree with us and they are doing what they can, but we feel that it is time that OSG as an organisation stood up for what is right.

You can rest assured that IOSF will continue to fight against this.

**Update from the Philippines**

It will soon be time for Diana Limjoco to release her two cubs back to the wild. In the meantime she has been given an official permit by the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) which will hopefully deal with any bureaucracy which may come up. As in so many countries bureaucracy can stand in the way of positive progress, so it is good that Diana has this permit.

Recently she sent us the following news “We have not been taking them to the river as our very own creek is up so high and there is so much food for them to get. They are left out at least 3 hours a day to forage and they return to the lair here when they are done with all that.

To release them where I think it is safest is over a two hour journey one way. For the last leg of their development I will take them there and camp out nearby to see how they fare on their own.”

Clearly it is an expensive time for Diana so if you would like to help her and the otters you can send a cheque marked “Philippines” on the back or make a donation online or you may like to adopt the otters at [www.ottershop.co.uk](http://www.ottershop.co.uk)

**Noisy Otters!**

We know that otters can be noisy – personally we were very aware of this when we brought the three Irish ones back to Skye! But a new report has shown that giant otters have the biggest “vocabulary” and that adults have 22 individual vocal sounds, and even newborn cubs can make 11 “babbles”. The report by Christina Mumm and Mirjam Knörnschild, from University of Ulm, Germany, is based on recordings from five groups of wild otters in Peru and three groups in German zoos. They found a great variety of
sounds - whistles, growls barks, hums, snorts, whines, and screams. They then related these to the behaviour of the otters at the time and found that some noises were simply making contact with other otters, whilst other noises were associated with begging for food. There were also mating calls and the cubs had a special noise they made during suckling – isn’t that gorgeous!

We all know that giant otters are very social and it is therefore not really surprising that they use such a variety of calls within the group. The authors suggest that because of the complexity of the calls the giant otters may be the most social of all otters. If you want to hear a sample of some of these calls go to http://news.discovery.com/animals/giant-otters-boast-big-vocabularies-141112.htm and if you would like to read the full report you can find it at http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0112562

Thanks
As ever we would like to thank everyone who has helped us in the past month. In particular we are grateful to Share Gift for their kind donation.

**Product of the Month **
The prefect present for your Valentine. Show just how much you care with our Valentine’s Adoption Gift Box.

www.ottershop.co.uk

Ways You Can Help
Discover many ways in which you can help raise money and awareness to help the otters, in our Fundraising Pack http://otter.org/raiseFundsForUs.aspx or find out what some of our supporters have done over the years in the online newsletters.

Have you enjoyed reading this e-newsletter? Then please forward it to someone else and spread the word.

If you are reading this for the first time and would like to receive all IOSF mailings, click here to sign up. Please be assured that we will never pass on your details to any other party and you will only ever receive emails from us.