



GUYANA OTTER WORKSHOP

2019



Dates: 1-14 November 2019

Partners: Save the Giants www.savethegiants.org
Caiman House, Yupukari, Guyana

INTRODUCTION

Otters are facing many problems today such as habitat loss, pollution and climate change. There are also conflicts with fishermen over competition for fish and this can be a big problem, particularly in poorer areas. We are now more aware of otters being traded illegally in Asia but trade in Giant Otter cubs also exists in South America.

In community work it is important to demonstrate that the presence of otters is a good sign for the environment as they need both clean water and a healthy land habitat. Like all species, including our own, they need a safe place to rest, enough food, clean water and peace to go about their daily lives without disturbance. So they are excellent ambassadors to a healthy environment and by monitoring the otters it gives us insight into the bigger picture of what we are doing to our planet.

Guyana is known as the “Land of the Giants” with giant anteaters, anacondas, caiman, jaguar, harpy eagles and of course the Giant Otter. It also has another species of otter, the lesser-known Neotropical Otter.

OTTER STATUS IN GUYANA

- **Giant Otters (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) - classified as “Endangered” in the Red List**
- **Neotropical Otters (*Lontra longicaudis*) - classified as “Near Threatened” in the Red List.**

The Giant Otter is not only the largest otter in the world but also one of the largest carnivores of South America. They are found in the Amazon basin but are poorly studied throughout their range, including in Guyana.

The Neotropical Otter is fairly widespread in South America and lives in a variety of habitats. However, little is known of its ecology, distribution or population status and in some areas it is believed to be verging on extinction. Wild population numbers of both species are merely speculation, due to insufficient data collection and active conservation plans have been implemented in only a few countries. It is therefore vital to develop more otter workers to deliver the data.

Conservation planning is already underway In Guyana and the Giant Otter is seen as an important species needing protection. However, few Guyanese have ever seen a Giant Otter and most of those that have are fishermen who often see them as competition for fish. Records of Neotropical Otters are very rare.



©Pablo Hernandez



©Ann Fulcher Photography



GUYANA OTTER WORKSHOP

2019



LOCATION

Yupukari is a small Amerindian village in western Guyana and has a population of about 3,000 people. The village is very spread out along the river Rupununi and the area has amazing biodiversity with black caiman, turtles, ocelot, jaguar and many species of birds,. The area leading to the village is largely savannah but it quickly changes to rainforest as you travel along the river, with a series of ponds and lakes. These areas are used by Giant Otters but Neotropical Otters prefer small creeks and streams off the main river. However naturally there is some overlap and camera traps set for Giant Otters have detected Neotropical.

THE WORKSHOP

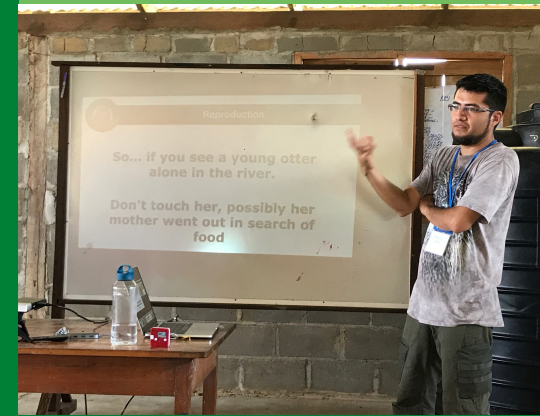
The journey from the Guyanese capital, Georgetown, to Yupukari was very “interesting”. It involved a one-hour flight in an 18-seater plane to Lethem, near the border with Brazil. From here we had a two-hour drive over a dirt track through streams and over precarious bridges!

This was IOSF’s first training workshop in South America and it was held in partnership with Save The Giants (STG), a community driven conservation organisation, dedicated to preserving Guyana's

wildlife via a multi-disciplinary approach. IOSF’s previous workshops had focussed on training rangers, forestry workers, students and government officials but this time the focus was totally on community and there was a lot of curiosity from adults and children.

One of the aims of the workshop was to train local people to conduct regular surveys and then pay them for their work, thus providing a valuable income for the community. They will then be able to gather data to map otter distribution and populations, through their own observations and through citizen science. They will also feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for THEIR otters. It was encouraging to find that many of the community are already aware of the presence of both Giant and Neotropical Otters and many fishermen reported seeing them while they are fishing quietly.

Another aim was to raise awareness of otters, their conservation and how a thriving otter population will benefit all co-existing species, including mankind. We wanted to set up a community outreach and educational programme, partnering with local communities living within the range of otters.





GUYANA OTTER WORKSHOP

2019



IOSF



INTERNATIONAL OTTER SURVIVAL FUND
www.otter.org

By showing how sensitive and sustainable ecotourism can produce more income for the area we will start to see major benefits for otter populations and the ecosystem.

There was already a wildlife club in the village but it was felt that it needed more input. STG intern, Ben Driver, is in Yupukari for a year and one of his roles is to work with existing volunteers to help the club to move forward.

IOSF's Education Officer, Ben Yoxon, Joe Sarvery from Para La Tierra and Voces de la Naturaleza in Paraguay and STG volunteers worked with community members to organise an afternoon of activities, including artwork and games, for the local children. Over 80 children attended from Yupukari and several surrounding villages. Ben had taken a number of letters from two Team Otter clubs from Scotland – Broadford Primary School and Ullapool Sea Savers. While some of the Yupukari children wrote back to their new friends Ben told them about life in a Highland village and about the wildlife, including the otters that we have here. The children also produced a poster showing local Amazonian species which was given to Broadford Primary School. In fact the school doing a project on the rainforest so it is perfect timing for this activity.

The adult part of the workshop involved presentations and discussion in break-out groups about various topics, including:

Introduction

- The work of IOSF and Save The Giants
- The role of otters in the ecosystem
- Global otter overview
- Giant and Neotropical Otter behavioural ecology and conservation
- Threats to otters including the pet trade, with a case study on trade in Asian small-clawed otter
- The value of otters in responsible and respectful ecotourism operations

Education

- Effective communication about otter conservation - with general public and tourists
- Implementing community environmental education programs - wildlife club involvement
- Case Study: IOSF Team Otter and an overview of the education work of Para La Tierra

Practical sessions included training in:

- Survey techniques
- Use of camera traps
- Holt and latrine detection
- Identifying individuals - unique throat patches of giant otters
- Spraint (faecal) analysis
- Data collection, use of GPS, data entry





GUYANA OTTER WORKSHOP

2019



IOSF



INTERNATIONAL OTTER SURVIVAL FUND

Camera traps were set up on the first day to see if any data could be collected during the course of the workshop but nothing was obtained. Cameras need to be set for some time so that the otters can get used to them and they can then reveal very useful data, including on other non-target species, such as ocelot.

Six members of the community, including four women, expressed an interest to help with more regular monitoring and they received a lot of training on the boats in how to recognise holts, use of GPS, data recording, etc. It is hoped that this will also encourage future young women to take part in science.

Regarding ecotourism, if this is done carefully and in a sensitive way this can provide more income for the local people. Two villagers, Oswin and Shannon, gave a talk on how they are involved in small-scale ecotourism and how it can be developed. They understand the wildlife, the needs of local people, etc and it is important to get the input of the people.

At present no crafts suitable for sustainable souvenirs are produced although there is a cotton spinning building, which is not in use at present. It was recommended that small items

could be produced as visitors prefer to buy souvenirs from where they have actually stayed. Caiman House already has a certain degree of ecotourism based on birds and wilderness experiences and this is an untapped market for the people. The community did comment that there should be a “cap” on the number of tourists to prevent disturbance to the wildlife and habitat.

Quite a lot of time was spent surveying for the otters in the area and the trainees were able to take their newly-learned techniques “into the field”. We found several holts of Giant Otters and were delighted to spot a number of these animals along the Rupununi river - one group of four including a cub and another group of two - and also one group of five in the lake. However the more elusive Neotropical otter evaded sight but we did manage to find a holt and sprainting site at the entrance to a small stream flowing into the main river. It is proposed that this site be studied further using camera traps.



SAVE THE GIANTS.ORG

CAIMAN HOUSE
YUPUKARI LEARNERS

IOSF
INTERNATIONAL OTTER SURVIVAL FUND
www.otter.org



GUYANA OTTER WORKSHOP

2019



THE FUTURE

Save The Giants already have a presence in Yupukari where they have been working for a number of years and with the new intern this will develop further. IOSF also has educational material which can be adapted for local use and the IOSF video will be translated into the local language, Makushi.

The community decided that the best way forward is to form a committee to cover both the survey work and the education through the wildlife club. In this way, the workload can be shared which will ensure that the project does not rely on just a few individuals. They also want to extend the outreach to neighbouring villages and it will be useful to have the Makushi video for this. They also plan to have an otter and wildlife festival around World Otter Day.

It is proposed that a small stipend be paid to those who commit to working on the project either in terms of field monitoring or education/outreach. This will provide a very valuable extra income to the community.

Overall, the workshop was a big success and it lays a strong foundation for future work on otter conservation and indeed general wildlife and environmental conservation

Thanks to everyone who took part:

- Pablo César Hernández-Romero (Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes)
- Jennifer Bucolo, Ashley Calandro, Benjamin Driver, Sunna Khan, Ruth Steel Mock, Bridgette San Marco, Michael San Marco, Christina Ward (Save The Giants)
- Joseph Sarvary (Para La Tierra and Voces de la Naturaleza)
- Ben Yoxon, Grace Yoxon, Paul Yoxon (IOSF)
- Niya Adolphus, Oswin Ambrose, Roselyne Ambrose, Caroline Barnabas, Marcilene Edwards, Eiotius Francis, Juliette Francis, Felix Holden, Shannon Holland, Cindy Lawrence, Helen Lawrence, Florence Laurindo, Luwara Laurindo, Maisy Li, Elean Roberts, Elanie Roberts, Russian (Toshao, Head of the village), Kelly Thomas, Lorrie Thomas, Tnesha Thomas, Michelle Thompson (Community)
- Caiman House for their hospitality during our stay

And to the sponsors of the project without whose help this could not have taken place:

Moody Gardens, Oklahoma City Zoo, The Rufford Foundation, Sequoia Park Zoo.



*All pictures are copyright of IOSF and Save the Giants unless specified.

