

This workshop in Laos marked our fifth in Asia following successful meetings in Cambodia, Indonesia, Bangladesh and China.

Otters are a top predator living and hunting in both terrestrial and aquatic environments. They need good water quality to survive so they are excellent environmental indicators. It's important to remember what is bad for the otter, ultimately affects all species, including our own. Their loss has a profound impact on local food webs, biodiversity, and habitat relationships.

Otters are one of the chief victims of Asia's illegal wildlife trade along with tigers and leopards, but their plight is often overlooked. For every tiger skin found in poacher's hauls there are at least 10 otter skins. In fact, one raid in Lhasa recently recovered an astonishing 778 otter pelts.

Laos, Myanmar, and China are a major hub for this illegal trade. In some parts of Asia, otters (particularly Asian small-clawed otters) are taken from the wild for the pet trade. Many of these are kept in terrible conditions and will later die. The fur and pet trade is seriously threatening the survival of otters and in some areas, they have become locally extinct.

In Asia there are very few scientists studying otters and their habitats. The IOSF is therefore working to provide a series of workshops to train more people in otter surveying field techniques, public awareness programmes, law enforcement and general conservation issues.

WORKSHOP REPORT

36 people attended our most recent workshop and most came from Laos, with six trainers from Sumatra (Indonesia), Taiwan, Sri Lanka, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

On the first day Paul Yoxon began by looking at the 13 species of otter in the world, and the problems they face in the wild. Of these 13 species, 12 are declining due to habitat loss, pollution, and illegal fur and pet trading.

This was followed by a presentation by Ling-Ling Lee on why otters are so important to a wetland ecosystem. She shared how the otter can be used as an "ambassador" to conserve wetland areas and their biodiversity. Focussing on Asian otters, she also looked at the identification of the species in the field, their ecology and status.

OTTER STATUS IN ASIA

Padma de Silva, Chair of the IOSF Asian Otter Conservation Network then summarised the status of otters throughout Asia:

- Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*), classified in the Red List as "Near Threatened"
- Smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*), classified in the Red List as "Vulnerable"
- Asian small-clawed otter (*Aonyx cinereus*), classified in the Red List as "Vulnerable"
- Hairy-nosed otter (*Lutra sumatrana*), classified in the Red List as "Endangered". This species has now been found in countries neighbouring Laos (Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia). It is



likely, therefore, that they were once in Laos, too, and may still be there, although this has not yet been confirmed.

OTTERS IN LAOS

We then turned our focus to the otters in Laos where very little work has been done over the years. The information we have was outlined by Aadrean, our South-East Asia Co-ordinator .

In 2016 Project Anoulak produced a report on their preliminary camera trap survey in Nakai Nam Theun National Protected Area. In this they stated:

“In Lao PDR, two IUCN-listed Vulnerable species, *Aonyx cinereus* (Asian small-clawed) and *Lutrogale perspicillata* (smooth-coated) occur. *Lutra lutra* (Eurasian) may also still occur, but their presence has only been recorded historically”

LOCAL REPORTS

As part of the project, they interviewed local villagers who confirmed that there were two species living locally:

“one with feet like dogs, small and dark, mostly seen in groups of 3-5 individuals” - **Asian small clawed otters**

“one with feet like ducks, large, mostly seen in pairs” - **Smooth-coated otters**

There were no reports of possible Eurasian otters.

In addition, the IOSF had been sent some information by the Wildlife Conservation Society who had records of sightings from the Nam Et Phou Louey National Park but they had no idea of the species.

Clearly it is fundamentally important to do base line surveys in this country. Unless we have this data, we cannot prepare and implement a practical conservation plan for the future.

HUMAN IMPACT ON OTTERS

The afternoon session concentrated more on the human impact on otters. It began with a presentation on the illegal otter trade in Laos for skins and body parts associated with medicines and how more work and information is needed in this field. There was also a practical session on how to identify the different species from the skins.

In the next session Grace Yoxon looked at how to care for confiscated otters. Padma de Silva outlined additional threats to otters through conflict with fishing communities and possible mitigation measures. The General Department of Forestry is responsible for conservation in the country and Senglat Philasa, Head of Wildlife Management Division, General Department of Forestry, spoke about these aspects from a Lao perspective.

FIELD TECHNIQUES

The second day began with field techniques starting with the identification and analysis of spraint (faeces). Paul Yoxon showed



how this can help to identify what the otter has been eating, but it does have limitations as only hard bodied prey will be identified. Spraint surveys are often used to give information on otter populations but there is no correlation between otter spraints and otter numbers. It merely gives you an idea of distribution. The final part of the morning was on the use of camera traps and other secondary signs like footprints to identify different species of otter in the field.

The participants then took part in an informal quiz to test them on their knowledge so far and the results were very encouraging.

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Otter habitat at Nakai © IOSF

Spraint and footprints of Eurasian otters © Jung-Tai Chao

FINAL DISCUSSIONS

The final morning was a discussion on what needs to be done to encourage otter conservation in Laos and the participants were divided into four groups to discuss the following questions:

1. What is the biggest threat to otters in Laos?
2. For the conservation of otters in Laos, please put the following into order of priority:
 - a) Social surveys
 - b) Field surveys
 - c) Illegal trade
 - d) Education
3. How are you going to achieve this?
4. How are you going to apply the knowledge and skills learnt from this workshop?
5. Can you recommend any other people or organisations to attend such a workshop?
6. Would it be useful to have a Network and/or Facebook group? Do you want to be a part of it?

CONCLUSIONS

The biggest threats were identified as habitat loss (including dam construction, deforestation), human conflict, illegal trade, hunting, human population, climate change.



It was agreed that local communities need to be involved as real conservation is not possible without their support. Social media can be a valuable tool to generate awareness and more information on records of otters which can then be investigated further.

For any future training it would be good to involve more university students to encourage them in otter studies. Members of the Army should also be included as they are involved in border enforcement, as well as village leaders.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

It was unanimously agreed to set up a Laos Otter Network which will be linked to the IOSF Asian Otter Conservation Network. Mr Chitpasong Senthammavong, Wildlife Management Division, was nominated to be the co-ordinator for the Network. Priorities for future work were identified as:

- Field surveys to obtain more data on distribution and species;
- Social surveys to assess human/otter conflict and gather more information on distribution of otters;
- Illegal trade to look further at the scale of the problem in terms of furs, body parts and pets;
- Education and public awareness.

The final act of the day was to present the participants with certificates.

NEXT STEPS

Following the actual meeting Paul and Grace Yoxon of the IOSF met with Mr Asoka Rasphone, Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to discuss further steps. He told them that the Lao government wants to set up a rehabilitation facility in Laos to care for otters and other wildlife which has been rescued from the illegal trade. We have therefore put them in contact with Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre in neighbouring Cambodia, and they are very keen to help with this project. So Mr Asoka will be arranging a visit to Cambodia to see the centre and how it is run.

SUCCESS

Yet again, the workshop has proved to be a great success. It may have taken nearly two years to organise and get all the stakeholders in place but eventually it has taken place, and the result can only be positive for otters in Laos.

FUTURE ACTION

IOSF always feels that it is vital that these events are not just talking shops but that they result in REAL action. This is not a conference but a training workshop, equipping people to go on to achieve otter conservation in their own country, where they know the culture and best practices for dealing with communities.

It was encouraging therefore, when one participant said at the closing session “This is not the end ... this is the beginning”.

Dr Paul Yoxon, Head of Operations, IOSF



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Wildlife Conservation Award Winner,
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