

# REPORT OF THE AFRICAN OTTER TRAINING WORKSHOP

20-25 July 2015, College of Wildlife Management, Mweka, Tanzania

IUCN recently updated their Red List for otters and the shocking news is that out of the 13 species of otter worldwide, 12 are declining in number. In fact, the only species which is classified as “stable” is the North American river otter.

There are three otter species in sub-Saharan Africa:



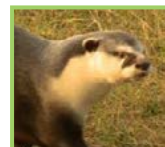
## The Spotted-Necked Otter (*Lutra maculicollis*)

is fairly widely distributed in sub-Saharan countries, from Senegal to Ethiopia and down to South Africa, but their detailed distribution is not fully understood.



## The African Clawless Otter (*Aonyx capensis*)

has the widest distribution of all the African otters although it is mostly absent in the Congo basin.



## The Congo Clawless Otter (*Aonyx congicus*)

has a very patchy distribution in the Congo Basin and little is known about its ecology and biology. Most of what we do know about their behaviour has been learnt through the care and rearing of orphaned cubs in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).



All three species are listed in the IUCN Red List and in 2015 they were upgraded to “Near Threatened” from “Least Concern”. However, this still creates a false impression that populations have recovered while there are strong reasons to suspect numbers continue to decline, largely due to increasing human population. In fact the actual reassessment process highlighted the lack of modern information and that a lot of the data is over 25 years old.

We have seen before in Asia how otters are often overlooked, as attention is directed towards high-profile species such as elephant, rhino, tiger and leopard and the same is true in Africa. There are so few people working on otters here and so little up to date knowledge that IOSF decided to hold a training workshop at the College of Wildlife Management in Tanzania. Similar workshops had been held in Asia and they were extremely successful, although clearly in Africa the format would have to be adapted

to African needs. The aim of the workshop was to train participants in field techniques, public awareness programmes, law enforcement and general conservation issues through a mix of classroom studies, discussion and practical field work.

Back in 1998 the IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group recognised that otter distribution and status in Africa should be a priority and in 2004 they stated further that Africa should be top of the list for project support and there was a great need to establish a network of people working on the species. However, until now nothing had been done, so this workshop was the first Pan-African event of this kind.

Participants came from ten sub-Saharan African countries - Benin, The Gambia, Ghana, DRC, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, South Africa and Tanzania. They had various backgrounds - people already working



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with otters through research or community work, park rangers, ecologists and those working in associated fields, such as wetland protection.

There are many global issues which are affecting our wildlife today - habitat loss, pollution, climate change and all the problems associated by poverty. In addition, otters also face conflict with fishermen who view them as a problem because they take fish and damage nets - these are expensive losses to a poor family reliant on fishing as a livelihood.

There are many global issues which are affecting our wildlife today - habitat loss, pollution, climate change and all the problems associated by poverty. In addition, otters also face conflict with fishermen who view them as a problem because they take fish and damage nets - these are expensive losses to a poor family reliant on fishing as a livelihood.



In some areas otters are hunted for fur and traditional medicines. At the workshop we heard of many ways that body parts are used, such as the eyes for eye infections, skin to ease childbirth, bone for fever and the meat to cure infertility. There is even a belief that the skin can deflect bullets! Some of these beliefs are ancient and a part of the tribal culture so it is difficult in these circumstances to change attitudes, but by working within the community it is possible to show that such practices are no longer acceptable.

However, the main problem is lack of awareness and this then leads to a lack of available funding for research, education and conservation. Participants agreed to conduct a survey to investigate how much people actually know of otters and already it has been found that some people, including professional biologists, do not even know they exist in Africa.



The classroom element of the workshop included various presentations on topics such as identification, behaviour, ecology, survey methods, field signs, etc... and IOSF's Dr Paul Yoxon gave a presentation on otters in a world context.

One problem with field signs is the identification of tracks of the spotted-necked otter as there are three different versions available in the literature and online. Jan Reed-Smith is therefore going to approach zoos with this species for prints so that a definitive guide can be given.

We heard about various other studies. Engedasew Andarge is working with fishing communities around Lake Tana in Ethiopia, and Hetherwick Msiska told us of his long-term studies of the spotted-necked otters in Malawi. On the environmental side, Yustina Kiwango from the Tanzanian National Parks Authority (TANAPA) looked at the problems facing



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Tanzania's wetlands and what efforts are being made to address these problems. Various examples of outreach were discussed: Jan Reed-Smith has been a part of the African Otter Outreach Project working on Rubundo Island National Park (Tanzania) and Hobokela Mwanjengwa, the Outreach Warden for the Park gave an overview of their work there. Hugues Akpona currently works in DRC but he has also done outreach in Benin which he outlined.

A highlight was clearly the presentation on Mazu's story by Rita Chapman, Lubama Delphin Kumbi, and Mubuma Chico Lunko (Sico) of the Kikongo Otter Sanctuary in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Rita recounted the story of how they raised the two Congo clawless otters between 2010 and 2012 which led to the formation of the Kikongo Otter Sanctuary.

There was so much interest in these animals from the local people that they rapidly became "celebrities" and indeed ambassadors for all otters. Since then they have continued their work with the community and Delphin told us how he had been a hunter from the age of about 17 but following his experience with the otters he no longer hunts. When asked by his friends why he no longer hunts he told them -

*"I am seeing that our animals are starting to disappear and you should also stop killing animals because in a few years we will have nothing left."*

He is now beginning to see a change in his friends too. Sico used to be a fisherman and has found an otter caught in a fish trap. Now he has fish ponds and plants fruit trees. These two men are not scientists but they are

now devoted to conservation not just of otters but all wildlife and they are an inspiration in the way they work with their own community to help them to understand the impact they are having on their own area and its wildlife.



Much of the time was given over to discussion so that participants could share their experience and get advice from each other and in particular we looked at social issues and educational tools. Educational material has to be relevant to the area and community in which it is to be used but by sharing material it provides a much bigger variety of tools which can be used.

The IOSF children's education pack "Let's Find Out About Otters" is to be translated in part into various local languages and the otter ID card prepared for the workshop will also be translated. We broke into groups to design more educational material and now have outline designs for two posters - one for general educational use and one for use with fishermen. These will be prepared by IOSF and then sent to participants to translate into their own language before printing.



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Unfortunately we were not able to find any spraint on the field day which actually demonstrates how hard it can be to find. However we did find signs of otters in the form of a barrier of large sticks placed around a fish trap to keep out otters!

Fortunately some spraint had been brought from Rubundo so that participants could familiarise themselves with it and practice analysis of the food remains contained in the spraint. We also looked at the various problems

and limitations associated with interpreting this data. Since the workshop some participants have already reported find spraint in their home areas which has provided new information on distribution.

The workshop identified long and short term goals for future work. Research alone is not conservation, but all programmes must be founded on recent sound scientific data. By working with communities we can generate interest and obtain base-line information on otters.

Public awareness is essential and a [Facebook](#) page has now been set up for people to post photographs of otters and their signs, linked to a confidential form for more detailed location information. This is linked to the [IOSF website](#) and the [African Otter Outreach Project](#).

A website will also be designed linked to the IOSF website and this will hopefully be available in English, French and possibly Swahili.

An online forum has been created for people to share experience and seek help and to share education tools. A second African Otter Workshop is planned for 2017 located in another region of Africa to facilitate attendance from other nations.

And new data is already being received. In 2005 possible spotted-necked otter spraint was found at Lake Manyara, Tanzania, but their existence has now been confirmed by a sighting. They have also been seen at Lake Kivu in Rwanda, and otter signs have been found at Liparamba Game Reserve, Tanzania, although as yet the species has not been confirmed.

In the long term we need to collaborate with others working in areas such as wetlands and make them aware of otters and their conservation. Working with them we can develop further awareness programmes using the best communication methods, such as posters, TV or radio, meetings, etc. It will also be necessary to bring in politicians of various levels (national, regional and local).

Working with the community we need to identify how we can help them and look at providing alternatives to encourage people not to kill otters. In The Gambia fishermen have been encouraged to turn to oyster culture which does not bring them into competition with otters. But a real problem area will be the traditional use of otters and working with community leaders will be key to this.



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## Thanks to all the attendees:

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|---|--|
| Akpona, A. H. (African Wildlife Foundation, DRC);         | Mgomo, W. (Game Warden, Liparamba Game Reserve, Tanzania)    |
| Andarge, E. (Addis Ababa Univ., Ethiopia)                 | Misiska, H. (Concern Otter Association, Malawi)              |
| Bada, P. (African Mobile Nature, Benin)                   | Msyani, E. (College of Wildlife Management Mweka, Tanzania); |
| Chapman, R. (Kikongo Otter Sanctuary, DRC)                | Mwamjengwa, H. (Rubondo Island National Park, Tanzania)      |
| Genja, E. (Mpanaga/Kipingere Game Reserve, Tanzania)      | Mwihomeke, F. (SEKOMU Univ., Tanzania)                       |
| Jallow, M. (CITES, The Gambia)                            | Nyamenya, P. (KISTOCH Otter Clubs, Kenya)                    |
| John, A. (TANAPA, Gombe National Park, Tanzania)          | Okes, N. (Univ. of Cape Town, South Africa)                  |
| Jonah, F. (Univ. of Cape Coast, Ghana)                    | Ondiek R. (Egerton & Boku Univ., Kenya)                      |
| Kaitila, R. (TANAPA Lake Manyara National Park, Tanzania) | Reed-Smith, J. (African Otter Outreach Project, U.S.A)       |
| Kamugisha, J. (Selous Game Reserve, Tanzania)             | Sawo, A. (Abuko Nature Reserve, The Gambia)                  |
| Kibasa, W. (Rubondo Island National Park, Tanzania)       | Tuyisenge, J. (Lake Kivu Monitoring Project, Rwanda)         |
| Kiwango, Y. (Sr. Ecologist, TANAPA, Tanzania)             | Yoxon, G. (IOSF, Scotland)                                   |
| Kumbi, L. D. (Kikongo Otter Sanctuary, DRC)               | Yoxon, P. (IOSF, Scotland)                                   |
| Lunko, M. C. (Kikongo Otter Sanctuary, DRC)               |  |

## The workshop was funded by:

Anderson-Rogers Foundation, Animal Defence Trust, Columbus Zoo, Rufford Foundation, Sacramento Zoo, and private donors.

