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The illegal trade in otter pelts in Nepal

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INTRODUCTION

Illegal trade in wildlife has been taking place in Nepal on a large scale in recent decades. While the country is not regarded as a primary consumer of wildlife, much of South Asia's wildlife trade moves through Nepal to markets in East Asia (Shakya, 2004). Nepal's central location in the Himalayan range places it at a key position along this trade route. Wildlife products sourced from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan pass through Nepal, and to a lesser degree from Nepal itself, along long, porous international borders, to markets in China (Wright and Kumar, 1997; Li *et al.*, 2000). To date, conservation efforts in Nepal, as elsewhere, have focused largely on high profile species, notably the Greater One-horned Rhinoceros *Rhinoceros unicornis*, Tiger *Panthera tigris*, and Leopard *P. pardus*, neglecting smaller, yet often threatened mammals, including otters.

This study documents otter seizure data for Nepal between 1989 and 2017. The trade in otters is chiefly known because their pelts are often sold alongside other high-value wildlife products, such as tiger skins. Otters are prized for their luxurious fur, made into clothing for consumers in China, particularly in the Tibet Autonomous Region. The clandestine nature of the illegal trade means that the true scale is far greater than seizure numbers reveal (Gomez *et al.*, 2016).

Three species of otter occur in South Asia: the Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra*, Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata*, and Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinereus*. The Eurasian Otter is listed as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List™ (IUCN, 2018) and in Appendix I of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). Smooth-coated and Small-clawed otters are listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List™ (IUCN, 2018), and in Appendix II of CITES. Eurasian and Smooth-coated Otters appear to be the most extensively traded otter species in South Asia (Gomez

et al., 2016). The Eurasian Otter has experienced a steep population decline; unlike the Smooth-coated and Small-clawed otters, however, which have undergone population declines of more than 30% over the past 30 years, the Eurasian Otter is recovering slowly due to greater protection in Europe (Pacifi *et al.*, 2013).

Protection of otters in Nepal

The status and distribution of otters in Nepal is poorly documented, making implementation of legal protection difficult. In 2007, Nepal's National Red List Series listed the Smooth-coated Otter as Endangered, with an estimated population of fewer than 1,000 individuals and the Eurasian Otter as Near Threatened, with an estimated population of between 1,000 and 4,000 individuals (Jnawali *et al.*, 2011). The Small-clawed Otter is classified as Data Deficient as its status in Nepal is too poorly known to assess (Jnawali *et al.*, 2011). All three otters are rarely observed, although sightings have been reported within protected areas, particularly those with rivers and wetlands, as well as in locations outside protected areas (Jnawali *et al.*, 2011).

The *National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act* of 1973 prohibits possession without a permit of 27 mammal species, but no otter species are included in the Act (Government of Nepal, 1973). A 2002 amendment to the 1961 *Aquatic Life Protection Act* (Government of Nepal, 2017), however, prohibits the hunting and killing of Eurasian and Smooth-coated Otters in the country, both within and outside protected areas. The Small-clawed Otter is not afforded protection by the *Aquatic Life Protection Act* and lacks any legal protection.

Notwithstanding Nepal's role as a leader in wildlife conservation in Asia, illegal trade in wildlife is prevalent and remains difficult to control. Nepal was an early signatory of CITES (1975). Political turmoil, social and economic constraints, and geographic factors present significant challenges to wildlife protection in the country. During the civil war, from 1996 to 2006, insurgents dominated many rural areas, including protected areas. The Nepalese Army, which had been responsible for protecting national parks and wildlife reserves since the 1970s, was redirected to address the insurgency (Heinen and Shrestha, 2006). Poaching proliferated within and outside protected areas, along with increased use of powerful weapons that replaced traditional methods of hunting (Bhujju *et al.*, 2009). The earthquake in 2015, measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale, devastated Nepal's infrastructure, further hampering conservation efforts.

In spite of these challenges, Nepal has recently begun to address the illegal wildlife trade more effectively. The return of the army to protected areas serves as a strong physical and psychological deterrent to trafficking (Bhujju *et al.*, 2009). New anti-poaching units resulted in increases in megafauna populations in Chitwan, Bardia and other national parks (Dudley, 2017). Yet a 2018 document reported that all three species of otter are among the most hunted, poached and illegally traded species in Nepal (Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, 2018).

▲ Eurasian Otter

Year of seizure	Place of seizure	No. of skins	Source
1989	Darchula	85	a
1994	Dhulabari	9	a
1996	Tamku	6	a
1996	Pashupatinagar	94	a
1997	Kathmandu	1	a
1998	Dhung Gad	5	b
2000	Thankot	1	a
2001	Kakadvitta	36	a
2002	Kathmandu	14	c
2003	Kathmandu	14	d
2004	Kathmandu	14	e
2004	*Kathmandu	109	f
2004	Kathmandu	6	g
2004	Daklang	6	e
2004	Kathmandu	14	g
2004	*Kathmandu	1	f
2004	Kathmandu	38	e
2004	Kathmandu	12	h
2004	Thankot	11	e
2005	Dunche	238	c
2005	Kathmandu	38	e
2013	Lalitpur	1	e
2014	Gaidakot	1	e
2017	Kathmandu	1	i
Total		755	

Table 1. Documented seizures of illegal otter pelts in Nepal, 1989–2017. Sources: see footnote¹;

*seizure location unknown, recorded in Kathmandu.

The otter trade

Rising incomes in Asia have led to a burgeoning demand for wildlife products and target species in the region face intense pressures from poaching (Gomez and Bouhuys, 2017). The trade offers high profits and little risk of detection or prosecution. Traditional consumers of otters have long sought the dense, durable, and luxurious fur of their pelts, but demand has increased with rising human populations and growing affluence (Gomez *et al.*, 2018). At a market in Linxia, China, over 1,800 otter pelts were reportedly for sale in 2009 (Bhujju *et al.*, 2009). There appears to be little trade in live otters in the region, even though the trade in live juvenile otters for pets is burgeoning in South-east Asian countries (Gomez and Bouhuys, 2018).

The value of wildlife products multiplies rapidly moving along the supply chain from source to market. Villagers and tribal peoples mostly poach to supplement incomes. Choosing the wildlife trade as a profession is not seen as unethical, and in many communities near protected areas at least one member of a family

is in prison for wildlife-related crimes (Bhujju *et al.*, 2009). Middlemen brokers are active in the capital, Kathmandu, in central Nepal, and in nearby towns, for example, Hetauda to the south, Butwal to the southwest, and Pokhara to the west of Kathmandu (Bhujju *et al.*, 2009). These brokers then pass the illegal wildlife commodities on to well-financed criminal networks that have resources for undertaking long distance smuggling on well-established international trade routes (Shakya, 2004).

METHODS

A database of seizure records of illegally traded otter pelts in Nepal between 1989 (about when reliable records began to be kept) and 2017 was constructed from government crime reports, published reports, NGO databases, and national and regional newspapers (Table 1). A challenge faced was that identification of the species of otter, mode of transportation, and origin and destination are rarely reported.

RESULTS

Trade volume

A total of 755 otter pelts were recorded as seized in Nepal in 24 incidents during the survey period (Table 1). All confiscations occurred either in or near Kathmandu or near an international border. Towns near international borders where seizures have been reported include Darchula, Tamku, and Dunche near the northern border with Tibet Autonomous Region; Dhung Gad near the western border with India; Dhulabari, Kakadvitta and Pashupatingar near the eastern border with India; and Gaidakot near Chitwan National Park on the southern border with India. One hundred and thirty-four pelts were seized in or near Kathmandu. [Not included in the analysis is the 2003 seizure of 778 otter skins in Sangsang, Tibet Autonomous Region, 100 miles north of the Nepal border, which transited Nepal from India en route to Lhasa (TRAFFIC, 2004; 2005a)].

In addition to the figures documented in Table 1, 787 otter skins were seized in Delhi, India, in 23 incidents between 1989 and 2011, most or all intended for trade through Nepal². The Indian capital of Delhi, located in the north of the country, serves as a hub for the collection of wildlife products from across India to be shipped into Nepal to points north. Some skins seized in Delhi bore signatures in Tibetan script, suggesting that the pelts were to be sent to China via Nepal (Gomez *et al.*, 2016). More otter skins are seized in India than any other South Asian country, a total of 2,949 between 1980 and 2015 (Gomez *et al.*, 2016). A decline in seizures in Delhi after 2011 parallels a similar trend in Nepal.

¹Sources: a. Shakya, 2004; b. Yonzon, 1998; c. Environmental Investigation Agency, 2016; d. Banks and Newman, 2004; e. Wildlife Conservation Nepal, 2017; f. Wildlife Crime Information and Database, 2017; g. WWF, 2009; h. Gajurel, 2004; i. Robin des Bois, 2017.

²Sources: WPSI, 1980–2015; Banks and Newman, 2004; TRAFFIC, 2005b; 2007a,b; WWF India, undated; Gajurel, 2004; The Indian Express, 2009.

Trade routes

The rugged topography and porous borders of Nepal facilitate the illegal wildlife trade, with Kathmandu serving as a “staging point” (Banks and Newman, 2004). Smuggling routes involve transport by lorry or bus, and in remote areas by animals or porters. In 2005, for example, the Royal Nepal Army seized a consignment of wildlife goods transported by lorry to the town of Syphrubensi, near the border with Tibet Autonomous Region, and carried by porters on foot across the border. The shipment contained 238 otter skins, together with tiger and leopard skins and bones hidden in noodle cartons (TRAFFIC, 2008). On occasion, wildlife products are transported by charter plane within Nepal (Shakya, 2004).

Along the southern border of Nepal, the Indian States of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and West Bengal are sources of poached wildlife (Shakya, 2004). To the north, the border with Tibet Autonomous Region lies in rugged, high elevation terrain, with few roads and weak Customs oversight. Small consignments cross mountain passes through a chain of couriers, often with the collaboration of Customs officials (Bhujju *et al.*, 2009). Surveillance is also weak in the huge protected areas on the border with Nepal/Tibet Autonomous Region, Shey Phoksundo National Park, Annapurna Conservation Area, Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, and others. Trafficking routes pass through traditional trading towns in the north, such as Tinker, Chhangaru, Darchula, Rolpa, Tamku, Tatopani, Taplejung, and Manang (Shakya, 2004).

Illegal wildlife goods from India are channelled through West Bengal and Sikkim across the eastern border of Nepal, and onwards to Tibet Autonomous Region (Ziegler *et al.*, 2010). The cities of Kolkata, Siliguri and Darjeeling in West Bengal, India, are significant hubs for trade into Nepal (Martin, 1999). Trade routes also pass directly between India and China, to the east and west of Nepal’s borders. Three direct access routes now open to facilitate legal trade between India and China may also abet the illegal trade. These are the Nathula Pass between Sikkim and Tibet Autonomous Region, the Shipkila Pass from Himachal Pradesh into Tibet Autonomous Region, and the Lipulekh Pass, at the tri-district point of Nepal, China and the Indian State of Uttarakhand.

Arrests and penalties

Although conviction rates and sentences for poachers and traffickers in South Asia have historically been low and sentences light, there appears to be a strengthening of sentencing in Nepal. Penalties for killing and trading tigers and Snow Leopards *Panthera uncia* now carry a



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substantial fine or a prison term of five to fifteen years, or both. Four men arrested in 2005 for smuggling 238 otter skins, as well as tiger and leopard parts, were fined the equivalent of USD1,500 and sentenced to between five and 15 years in prison, since tigers and leopards were also seized (TRAFFIC, 2008). Yet arrests often target only the carriers, who are just one link in the chain of trade, and one that is easily replaced.

The movement of wildlife obtained illegally in India and brought into Nepal is likely facilitated by lack of enforcement at the border. In India, conviction in wildlife cases carries a prison term of between three and seven years. However, conviction rates are low. Of the 784 cases pertaining to otter, tiger, or leopard seizures in India between 1994 and 2003, only 14 of the 1,400 individuals arrested were convicted and sentenced (Banks and Newman, 2004). By contrast, the single largest seizure of otter skins on record (778), which occurred in China in 2003, resulted in one Chinese national from Tibet Autonomous Region being sentenced to death and another person to life imprisonment (TRAFFIC, 2005a).



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- ▲ **Smooth-coated Otters** are highly social, with family groups consisting of the mother and her young offspring, often joined by the father and older siblings.
- ▶ **Otter pelts, Harbin, China, 2007.** Species of cured otter pelts are hard to identify.

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Otter pelt, Litang, China, 2005. Otter pelts are favoured for use in traditional garments in Tibet Autonomous Region.

CONCLUSIONS

Seizures of otter pelts in Nepal peaked between 2003 and 2005, mirroring a similar trend in the record of seizures throughout South and South-east Asia (Gomez *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, a decline in otter seizures between 2005 and the present parallels a decline in otter seizures in all South Asia records (Gomez *et al.*, 2016). This could reflect a decline in the trafficking of otters. However, numerous reports document a thriving trade in otters across Asia (e.g. Gomez *et al.*, 2016; Gomez and Bouhuys, 2017).

It is unclear why there was a lull in seizures of otter pelts between 2006 and 2012. The decline could be a reflection of weaker enforcement efforts or lower

seizure reporting. Alternatively, the trend may reflect an increasing scarcity of otters. This is supported by reports of steeply declining populations of all three otter species throughout Asia (Pacifi *et al.*, 2013). For example, a Smooth-coated Otter population documented in Chitwan National Park (e.g. Acharya and Lamsal, 2010) now appears to be extirpated (S. Thapa pers. comm. to M. Savage, April 2018). Most likely, a decline of seizures reflects a combination of difficulty of detection of increasingly sophisticated traffickers combined with declining otter populations in the region.

The illicit wildlife trade in Nepal has received increased attention and judicial scrutiny in recent years, and while otters have benefited from the crackdown on the tiger and leopard trade, they remain largely below the law enforcement radar. Mitigation of the otter trade requires the same remedies as wildlife trafficking in general, including more effective attention from law enforcement, judicial, and political agencies, a better conviction rate and stiffer penalties, a better understanding of trade routes and methods, closer scrutiny of trading towns, increased training of Customs agents, and a cross-border standardised database of criminal trafficking. Banks and Newman (2004) suggest the creation of a multinational specialised wildlife crime unit to track the trade across the borders of Nepal, India and China. In January 2011, the South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network (SAWEN, <http://www.sawen.org/>) was officially created as an inter-governmental wildlife law enforcement support body of eight South Asian countries, including Nepal. SAWEN would be well advised to take a closer look into the illegal trade in otters and their products. In addition, ecotourism is a robust contributor to regional economies and is an incentive for shutting down the illegal wildlife trade. All three otter species in the region are threatened, and without more effective policing, face an uncertain future in Nepal and elsewhere in South Asia.



◀ Small-clawed Otters

are among the most heavily traded otter species in South Asia. Along with Smooth-coated Otters, populations are thought to have declined by more than 30% in the region in the past 30 years.

Photograph: © N. Duplax

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