

IUCN 13th International Otter Congress: An update of relevance to wildlife trade

Wild otter populations in Asia are in trouble due to increasing loss and degradation of their wetland habitat and to human-otter conflicts over aquatic species targeted for food. A further, significant threat to their survival is the black market demand for their skins and increasingly as exotic pets. This threat has only recently come to light after quantities of otter skins were discovered in trade during an investigation into the illegal big cat skin trade in China in 2006 (Banks *et al.*, 2006).

Whilst plenty of past work has helped to gain an understanding of the dynamics of trade in otter skins in the northern hemisphere (Foster-Turley and Santiapillai, 1990), very little effort has been made to understand and tackle the illegal trade in otters in Asia, largely due to ignorance of the situation and an overall lack of concern for low-profile species.

In light of this rising threat to otter populations, otter specialists and experts met in Singapore in July 2016 for the IUCN 13th International Otter Congress to discuss—amongst other conservation issues—ways to mitigate the threat of illegal trade. The Congress was organized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission (IUCN-SSC) Otter Specialist Group (OSG), and hosted at the Singapore Zoo by Wildlife Reserves Singapore (WRS). The event brought together over 100 researchers, specialists, biologists, conservationists, students, members of the OSG, and others from over 20 countries to discuss the status of otters in Asia and their conservation needs.

TRAFFIC facilitated and presented during the trade segment of the Congress, highlighting the scale of illegal wildlife trade in South-east Asia and, more specifically, the illegal trade in selected Asian otter species. This was based on a report jointly undertaken by TRAFFIC and the OSG, *Illegal Otter Trade: An Analysis of Seizures in Selected Asian Countries (1980–2015)* (Gomez *et al.*, 2016), which was launched at the Congress. The study was initiated to raise the profile of four Asian otter species encountered in trade i.e. the Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* (listed as Near Threatened on the *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*), Hairy-nosed Otter *Lutra sumatrana* (Endangered), Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinereus* (Vulnerable), and the Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata* (Vulnerable).

All four species assessed in the study were encountered in illegal trade, with 161 recorded otter seizures across 15 countries in Asia between 1980 and 2015 involving an estimated 5881 individuals. The majority of the seizures were of otter skins, particularly in India, Nepal and China. Judging by the large numbers of skins recorded in some seizures, it is likely to be taking a toll on wild otter populations. This trade seems mostly to involve the Eurasian Otter and Smooth-coated Otter, although it must be noted that in general a large number of seized skins were not identified to species level owing to the difficulty of distinguishing between the skins of the different species. While the seizures of otter skins has increased over the years in terms of frequency, the quantities seized have decreased. This could be attributed to an increase in undetected trade, or more worryingly, to declining otter populations.

Another new finding is a rising demand for otter pups for the pet trade. In countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Viet Nam, otters are hunted to supply a growing pet trade that appears to be mostly domestic, in which the Small-clawed Otter and the Smooth-coated Otter are evidently popular. The emerging trend of otters being used as pets is further hinted at

through preliminary scans of social media websites and trade fora, in which a flourishing online pet trade has been discovered (e.g. in Indonesia and Viet Nam), in addition to an increasing number of seizures involving live individuals since the early 2000s.

The Hairy-nosed Otter was by far the least encountered species in this study, with only six individuals seized between 2002 and 2008 in five separate incidents. All the seizures of this species, three of which involved skins and three of which involved live individuals, occurred in Cambodia. Considering that this species is already under severe pressure, any level of trade is likely to pose a significant risk to its survival.

The report, while providing a preliminary understanding of the issues endangering otter populations in selected parts of Asia, also highlighted significant gaps that need to be addressed in order to mitigate these threats. First, the true extent of the trade remains unknown due to its inherently covert nature, and the estimates in the report are likely to under-represent the magnitude of the trade. Second, little is known about the status of the four Asian species—uncertainty on population sizes, reproduction rates and in some cases distribution makes it difficult to determine each species's resilience in the face of exploitation. Third, in most seizure case studies, otters were not identified to species level, a factor that clearly poses an obstacle to estimating the impacts of the trade on otters at the species level, further complicating the task of prioritizing species of concern for conservation action.

TRAFFIC, in partnership with the OSG, hopes to address these trade-related gaps and aims to contribute to improved otter conservation. Participants at the Congress were urged to start publishing observations on trade, or to report incidents of trade to TRAFFIC, using tools like TRAFFIC's Wildlife Witness App¹. Reports can then be analysed and used to support law enforcement efforts as well as further our understanding of the trade dynamics that are threatening otter species in Asia.

REFERENCES

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¹The "Wildlife Witness" App, developed by the Taronga Conservation Society Australia, in partnership with TRAFFIC, enables users to report suspected illegal-trade in wildlife in South-east Asia easily and quickly by taking a photo, pinning the exact location of an incident and sending these details to TRAFFIC. Wildlife Witness is free to download at <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/wildlife-witness/id738897823?mt=8>