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THE HUILLIN IN ARGENTINA

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In lakes, ponds and rivers in the Argentinean Andes of Patagonia, in central and southern Chile, and in the complex, fjord-rich marine coasts of southern Chile and its islands, lives the species of otter which seems to occupy the smallest geographical range (in terms of area) in the world: the southern river otter or huillin, *Lutra provocax*.

In 1982 we began research in Argentina on this previously almost unknown species, which is included in the IUCN Red Data Book as "Indeterminate", and is included in the Argentine list of endangered species. The work, financed by the National Parks Administration, covers several aspects of huillin's conservation biology.

1. Distribution survey:

As with much of the South-American fauna, the published geographical range of this species, particularly in Argentina, was vague, so in fact we did not know where the populations actually were. We adapted to our conditions the methodology of the British surveys for the Eurasian otter, and visited 275 sites in the north-Andean Patagonic National Parks (Lanin, Nahuel Huapi, Puelo and Los Alerces), in search of huillin signs. We found evidence of the otter's presence at only 32 sites (11.6%), most of them (28) in the large Nahuel Huapi Lake sub-basin. These Andean parks are mountainous, with many lakes of glacial origin, and densely forested, with a cool climate.

The species, according to local settlers and Park-rangers, disappeared from the other 3 parks and from the south of Nahuel Huapi in the last three or four decades, apparently due to intensive hunting. The population of Nahuel Huapi is of critical importance for conservation of the species in Argentina. There is also a population on Staten Island (Tierra del Fuego) but its importance and status is, as yet, unknown.

The results of the survey also indicate that human disturbance by itself (of course, if animals are not hunted) has not had a significant impact on huillin populations and status. We measured the effect of frequency of human visitors, presence of settlements nearby and the presence of domestic dogs, for each site. The results also strongly suggest that very dense and mature vegetation cover on the shore, very close to the water's edge, including abundant fallen trees, is a key factor for permanent and healthy populations. (For details see Chehebar [1985](#), [1986](#)).

2. Food-habits and habitat use:

We decided to make studies on some aspects of the ecology of the species in Quettrihue Peninsula, Nahuel Huapi Lake, especially in Laguna Patagua. Otters use this pond all the year round, with roughly the same intensity at all seasons, judging from scat deposition rates. Through analysis of scats on a monthly basis, over 18 months, we now know that there, the huillin feeds mainly on macrocrustaceans - the anomuran *Aegla*, endemic to South America, and the parastacid crayfish *Sammastacus*. Fish make up a very low percentage of the diet, with a peak of 10% (frequency of occurrence) during late autumn. Otters also seem to eat large quantities of clams (*Diplodon*) but we have not directly confirmed this yet. The most likely explanation of this pattern, i.e. few fish and many crustaceans, lies in the relative availability and abundance of prey species in these oligotrophic, clear and cool waters.

We have also mapped scat distribution, to gain insight into habitat use, and the data are being analysed.

3. Behaviour:

We have begun the last phase of the study, using radio-tracking (the equipment has been bought with OSG funds). We hope to obtain information about movements, home range, habitat use, activity patterns and, with a little bit of luck, densities. The ultimate goal is to devise a management strategy.

We recommend re-introduction of huillines in Lanin, Puelo and Los Alerces National Parks, through translocations of animals, so as to minimize the risks involved in the present dependence on Nahuel Huapi and Staten Island (as far as we know) for the conservation of the species in Argentina. Also, we recommend careful monitoring and protection of the Nahuel Huapi population and protection of the Staten Island ecosystems.

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References

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