

## IUCN OTTER SPECIALIST GROUP BULLETIN VOLUME 10 PAGES 28 – 30

Citation: Kranz, A. (1994) Otters Increasing - Threats Increasing. *IUCN Otter Spec. Group Bull.* 10: 28 - 30

### OTTERS INCREASING - THREATS INCREASING

Andreas Kranz

*Institut für Wildbiologie und Jagdwirtschaft, Peter Jordanstr. 76, A-1190 Wien, Austria*

**Abstract:** In some parts of Central Europe populations of otters are apparently increasing. Until recently, no research was being conducted on the ecology of otters in mainly artificial habitats like fish farms. Otters are not only a new source of conflict requiring species management, but appear once again threatened by illegal hunting. Austria is dealing with this problem using compensation for otter damage, electric fencing and translocation of problem otters. Despite a rise in illegal killing, Austria does not formally recognise this as a threat.

In some parts of Central Europe populations of otters (*Lutra lutra L*) are apparently increasing. In Austria the species currently inhabits 15% of its original habitat (Gutleb, 1992). The number of dead otters found here increased from one in 1984 to thirteen in 1993 (Gutleb, 1994). Claimed damage caused by otters in fishfarms increased from 42,000 AS in 1984 to more than 1,200,000 ATS in 1992 (Bodner, 1994). Both the increased traffic victims and damages can only partly be explained in terms of more public interest in this species. No data from adequate surveys are available from former years. However, there is a consensus among fishfarmers, conservationists (Schnogl, 1994), hunters and scientists that otters have increased in terms of number and area inhabited as well. The situation seems similar for parts of the Czech Republic and of Hungary.

Until recently, no research was being conducted on the ecology of otters in mainly artificial habitats like annually drained ponds for carp (*Cyprinus carpid*) production. Since a few years, Austrian, Czech and Dutch research activities are attempting to fill this gap. In this pond area, fish, the most common food for otters, is abundant. Direct observations revealed that otters, well known as a solitary single-living species (Sandell, 1989), can form groups of up to eight animals (Kranz, in prep.). Groups occur either along streams when access to fish in ponds is restricted by ice, or at ponds with very high stocking levels of fish.

In Lower Austria a spraint survey was carried out six times a year (1992 -1993) in an area of 36 km<sup>2</sup> including 140 artificial ponds. Otters never visited 55 of these ponds and another 27 ponds only once, indicating that suitable habitat remains. Moreover, an average of one illegal trap (mostly leg-hold traps) per 9 km<sup>2</sup> was found. They were obviously set for otters.

X-rays taken of two otters killed by traffic revealed shotgun pellets (Gutleb, 1994), and one of two radio-tagged otters was shot by a poacher in the Czech Republic in 1992 (Miller et al., 1994).

Obviously, otters are not only a new source of conflict requiring species management, but appear once again threatened by illegal hunting. How is Austria dealing with this problem?

1. Damage presumably caused by otters is reimbursed by WWF Austria, local hunter and nature conservation associations, and by the government (Bodner, 1994).
2. Electric fences are tested to keep otters away from most valuable ponds (Bodner, 1994).
3. Translocation of otters from pond areas is in a first stage of discussion (Schnogl, 1994).
4. Illegal killing has not yet been recognized as a severe threat.

The present situation is both unsatisfactory and difficult. (If you have any good ideas as to how this problem can be solved, please write to me !

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I am very grateful to H. Gossow for critical comments on the manuscript.*

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