

**IUCN OTTER SPECIALIST GROUP BULLETIN
VOLUME 10 PAGES 10 - 14**

Citation: Macdonald, S. (1994) Meeting Of the European Section of the OSG. *IUCN Otter Spec. Group Bull.* **10:** 10 - 14

MEETING OF THE EUROPEAN SECTION OF THE OSG

Sheila Macdonald

Bramblings, Wrabness Road, Ramsey, Harwich, Essex, CO12 5NR, United Kingdom

Abstract: The European Section of the OSG met in June 1994 at Otterpark Aqua Lutra in the Netherlands. Reports from each country are summarised. The eight main recommendations are: all European countries that have not signed the Bern Convention should do so urgently; 1995 will be the Second European Year for Nature Conservation and the otter could be a good mascot for sustainable land use within whole water catchments; lifting the Iron Curtain provides a great opportunity because of the immense biodiversity in eastern Europe; it will be more cost-effective to protect this biodiversity instead of destroying it for short-term economic gain only to spend vast sums trying to restore it later; the current low economic base in eastern Europe means that money sent from the West now will have a disproportionately large effect in the East, so now is the time to act; knowledge should be transferred between east (which have undisturbed ecosystems) and the west (which has technology and experience of good and bad laws and regulations); to this end, publications should be made available in English and Russian, the main scientific languages throughout Europe; and better coordination is needed between IUCN specialist groups.

The European Section of the IUCN Otter Specialist Group met on 6th June 1994 prior to the otter seminar held at the Otterpark Aqua Lutra near Leeuwarden in the Netherlands. Representatives from 19 countries participated. Initially a representative from each country presented a brief account of the current state of otter conservation in that country. A summary is given below.

In **NORWAY** an otter group has been formed but is not very active. The otter population is thought to be expanding and so ideas for reintroductions there may be unnecessary. Acidified rivers are being restored and restocked with fish but the otter is not welcomed in these projects. High levels of mercury have been found in some south Norwegian otters.

In **DENMARK** the population is expanding though it is still confined to mid and north Jutland. Stop grids are now compulsory on all fyke nets in Danish freshwaters. Fauna passages under roads are thought to reduce traffic mortality considerably. National field surveys will be carried out at 5 year intervals and studies on reproduction, contamination and hormone levels in spraints are planned. Lead pellets (gun shot) are now found in 5% of dead otters.

In **BRITAIN** otter distribution is increasing from the strongholds of the north and west. National field surveys are carried out every 7 years. The Government's Joint Nature Conservation Committee is drawing up a conservation strategy for Britain's otters but it is not clear if there will be financial support.

In **POLAND** the otter is a game species with all year protection but there are calls for full protection to be withdrawn due to problems of predation at fish farms. A national field has been completed with signs found at 79% of 2081 sites. The species is absent only in Silesia and central Poland. A major problem has been created by the privatization of fish farms and plans to make the River Vistula a major channel for heavy boat traffic may also pose threats.

In **GERMANY** most otters are found in the former GDR e.g. in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. In Saxony a stable population occurs close to the Czech Republic and otters have been recorded on the River Elbe at Dresden. The Otter Zentrum is still open to the public despite the fire and subsequent further attacks.

In **THE NETHERLANDS** occasional signs of animals have recently been recorded but the species is still considered as extirpated. Eels from around the country have been monitored for PCBs showing that only parts of the north are free from this type of contamination. Studies have been initiated on coplanar PCBs and dioxins. The Dutch Government has financially supported the restoration and re-creation of wetlands with the final goal of reintroduction but remaining suitable habitats also require protection.

In **FRANCE** the otter population seems to be expanding from its stronghold in the Massif Central towards the east and into the Rhone. Feasibility studies are being carried out for possible reintroductions in the north east and near Strasbourg.

In the **CZECH REPUBLIC** three main areas remain as otter strongholds. Field surveys are being carried out together with investigations into PCB levels and an otter station is being built for captive research and breeding.

In neighbouring **SLOVAKIA** some regions still hold viable populations.

Otters occur throughout **BELARUS** but more signs are found on natural rivers than on canals. The presence of beavers is thought to have a positive influence on otter numbers.

SLOVENIA offers a wide range of habitat types but the otter population appears now to be divided into 2 with about 70% of waterways being severely polluted. A field survey is planned for next year.

In **CROATIA** the northern rivers such as the Drava and Sava hold good populations but in the south of the country the situation is serious. Some of the best otter areas have been combat zones in the war and many mines have been laid in wetlands.

Viable populations can be found in **AUSTRIA** adjacent to the Czech Republic, an area of fish ponds. The population is spreading south towards the Danube. A central collection point for otter bodies has been set up, a radio-tracking study has just been completed and experiments are to be carried out on sex hormone levels in spraints and on food choice.

In **ITALY** the Gruppo Lontra is now virtually nonexistent. The only regular monitoring of a last wild population is carried out in the south (Sele - Galore Rivers) and other remnant populations may now be extinct. There are four otter centres for captive breeding but with so few otters left in Italy it may be more important to concentrate on strong protection of existing populations and habitats rather than to prepare for reintroductions.

In **SPAIN** populations are thought to be increasing in Catalonia, Galicia and Andalucia but in the drier parts of the country numbers may be declining. Over abstraction of river water and a lack of any central hydrological plan pose serious problems. Reservoirs may be causing fragmentation of populations. Several groups in Spain are now working on various aspects of otter biology and conservation.

A field survey is planned in **PORTUGAL** next year and information is currently being collated on distribution, corpses etc. A drought over the last two years has led to rivers drying and studies are needed to assess the real effects of this on otters but no finances are available. Dam building in Spain on rivers flowing through both countries may have a serious effect on water flow in Portugal.

The representative from **TURKEY** had collected data from the N-E of the country based on past hunting records. There are an estimated 2 million illegal hunters and 5 million gun owners in Turkey so poaching may be a serious problem.

Dams and reservoirs on the Euphrates may produce knock-on effects for otter populations in **SYRIA**.

The representative from the Council of Europe advised the OSG to make use of the Council of Europe as an ambassador willing to pass on our views to governments throughout Europe, not only those within the European Union. He also stressed the need for eastern European countries to sign the Bern Convention. (It should be noted that **ROMANIA** has now signed and so the open season for otter hunting has closed).

The rest of the OSG meeting was taken up with general discussion and a review of membership. Claus Reuther was re-elected unopposed as Chairman of the European Section, Eladio Fernandez-Galiano was elected to represent the Council of Europe and names were sought for countries currently not represented in the group

In view of the emerging importance of eastern European countries as harbourers of widespread otter populations and because currently even limited financial support is sufficient to initiate conservation projects, it was decided that a fund should be set up to provide seed corn finance. The German Otter-Zentrum and the Dutch Otterpark offered to make donations and a group of five regional representatives formed a committee to decide which projects would receive funding.

The final recommendations emerging from the general discussion are:

1. All European countries which have not yet signed the Bern Convention are requested to do so as soon as possible, since this convention forms an important basis for the protection of European fauna, flora and habitats.
2. The Council of Europe has declared the year 1995 as the second European Year for Nature Conservation. The special theme is "Nature conservation outside protected areas". The otter is an excellent symbol for this theme because the successful protection of the otter (and its habitats) is not possible exclusively within protected areas. One of the most important preconditions for protecting otter habitats is a sustainable land use within the whole water catchment area. Therefore IUCN as well as the Council of Europe, the European Union and national governments are requested to use the opportunities offered by this 2nd. European Year for Nature Conservation to encourage a sustainable land use within water catchments and to use the otter as a symbol for this campaign.
3. All European countries should be aware of the great opportunity for a real European nature conservation policy which is arising from the lifting of the Iron Curtain. The western as well as the eastern European governments should be aware of the immense biodiversity in eastern Europe and of the responsibility resulting from this for all economic development activities in the eastern parts of Europe. The eastern European countries should be brought to a position which allows them to conserve this rich biodiversity and to serve as a core area for recolonization of the western parts of Europe by many species, including the otter.
4. A European nature conservation policy should recognize that it is much more effective - and cost effective - to give the top priority to the protection of existing habitats and populations rather than to destroy them because of economic interests, only to spend vast resources in restoring them in the future.
5. To ensure this policy it is necessary to give considerable funds for nature conservation to eastern Europe now. Because of the current low economic base in these countries this money could be used very effectively. An increase in the economic level in the east European countries, and the movement towards a free and private market, as well as private landownership, will make such support much more expensive in the future.
6. Besides these economic aspects it is of great importance to ensure a complete transfer of knowledge between east and west. Scientists and conservationists from the east European countries should have the opportunity to learn about western technology and the advantages and disadvantages of western laws and regulations. They should also be shown management and fund-raising techniques. Scientists and conservationists from the western European countries should have the opportunity to learn more of the undisturbed or little disturbed ecosystem in east Europe.
7. One positive step towards information transfer is the translation of publications into the main scientific languages (Russian and English).
8. We need better co-ordination between the different IUCN Specialist Groups. In particular the Captive Breeding Group is encouraging efforts to breed and release animal species to the wild while the Otter Specialist Group is, in general, not in support of this aspect of nature conservation.