

REPORT

NEWS FROM THE GIANT OTTER PROJECT IN PERU

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Abstract: In 1994 in Manu National Park, the Otorongo group is now led by Isla; there is further evidence that tourism is affecting breeding adversely. Tourism has doubled this year, but the national park authority have signed an agreement accepting responsibility for protecting the animals, and are building an observation tower for tourists that does not seem to trouble the otters. We organised a seminar on "Management of tourism in the reserves of Madre de Dios" in the department capital, Puerto Maldonado, and contributed to another organised by the University of Cusco and the park administration. We published a booklet containing the most important results of our study. We investigated the acoustic communication of giant otters under water, finished a study on mercury contamination of fish, produced a book, "Die Wölfe der Flüsse - Riesenotter und ihr Lebensraum Regenwald", and produced a TV film "Die Riesenotter vom Madre de Dios".

The project "Status, habitat and conservation of Giant Otters (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) in Peru" from the Frankfurt Zoological Society, - Help for Threatened Wildlife - started in 1990. After nearly three years of continuously fieldwork, the project is now run with a yearly two months fieldwork period in Peru and ongoing analysing, management and coordination in Germany. Following we give the report for 1994.

MONITORING OF THE GIANT OTTER POPULATION IN MANU NATIONALPARK IN PERU

Since the beginning of the project, nearly five years ago, we censused the entire Giant Otter population in Manu Nationalpark at least once a year. Giant Otters can be distinguished from one another by their throat markings and therefore we are able to include even individuals in our stock-taking. So we receive, besides the number of the otters, also important data about reproduction, social biology, mortality and migration of this population. In 21 oxbow lakes of the Manu river we counted a total of 33 animals in 5 groups and 2 solitarians. This number is less than in the years before (about 45 animals), but we found certain signs (fresh tracks, scats, dens) from three more groups. This suggests that the population of Giant Otters in Manu Nationalpark remains constant in the last four years.

We stayed some days with our main study group at Lake Otorongo, which we studied over more than ten months before. The Otorongo otters had a litter of two pups. It was interesting, that "Triangel", the reproductive female since 1992, transferred her leader position to her younger sister "Isla", even though "Triangel" remains within the group.

"Nuevo", the reproductive male, continued in his position. He joined the group 1991, when the leading female and male at that time disappeared.

Our studies of the last years indicate, that the traffic by tourist canoes on the oxbow lakes may reduce the reproductive success of the otters. As a result of our seminar with the parkrangers last year the administration of the Manu Nationalpark prohibited the visit of Lake Otorongo by canoe. An illegal used canoe was removed. At Lake Salvador, which is the only oxbow lake with a lot of tourist canoes at the moment, we did not observe any offspring this year either - which is an exception among Manu's otter population.

INCREASING TOURISM

Less problems with terrorism and Cholera resulted in an increase of tourism in Peru, specially in the tropical rainforest areas in the southeastern. More than thousand visitors had been recorded in Manu Nationalpark up to September, the double compared with the previous yearly numbers. Therefore the ideas and campaigns from the project concerning a tourism which takes care for nature and Giant Otters are just in time.

On the instructions from the project the artist Yvette Delgado Vasquez from Cusco produced 8 panels with information in english and spanish about Giant Otters and rules to observe these animals without disturbing them. These panels were put up at control posts of the nationalpark and other reserves and at tourist lodges.

With the agreement of the nationalpark administration and all the local tourist agencies we planned to build up an 10 meters tall observation tower at Lake Otorongo. A provisional platform last year showed that a stationary construction at the shore of the lake allows terrific spottings and that the otters get used to it very rapidly. Unfortunately there had been delays with the carrying out. Now the administration of the Manu Nationalpark accept responsibility and we hope that the tower will be finished before the next tourism season will begin in May this year.

COOPERATION

After intensive cooperation for years an agreement between the Giant Otter Project and the administration of the Manu Nationalpark was signed this year. This agreement contents the continue of the cooperation concerning the monitoring of the Giant Otter population, the education of the parkrangers, the public relations work and the making out of management plans in the future.

EDUCATION

In cooperation with the FPCN (Fundación Peruana para la Conservación de la Naturaleza) and with the SNPH (Santuario Nacional Pampas del Heath - a reserve at the river Heath, the border to Bolivia, where we proved Giant Otters 1992) we organized a seminar with the subject " management of tourism in the reserves of Madre de Dios ". The seminar was held from 17th to 20th of September in Puerto Maldonado, the capital of the departement. Different groups were represented by nearly 60 participants: rangers from the SNPH, two members from every local tourist lodge, independent tourist guides from Puerto Maldonado, representatives of the

university and the schools, representatives of the native and settler communities, the local forestry police, the state tourism authority, representatives of peruvian and international conservation organizations and journalists. The lectures were as different as the participants. There were talks about "reserves in the Departement Madre de Dios, characteristics and their significance for the development of the region", "natives and tourism" and "introduction to the ecology of tropical rainforests". The Giant Otters as bioindicators and flag ship species had been a main subject. A two days excursion to the reserve Explorers' Inn at the river Tambopata formed part of the seminar. An information folder and a certificate was given to the participants.

In Cusco the information from the Giant Otter project formed part of a three days seminar organized by the university of Cusco and the administration of the Manu Nationalpark.

In 1994 we published a booklet comprising the most important results of our studies and recommendations for a better protection of the highly endangered Giant Otters. The 36 pages long booklet is available in english and spanish. We took 2000 booklets with us to Peru and presented them in a press conference to INRENA in Lima (Instituto Nacional de Recursos Naturales, the ministry of agriculture and conservation). Representatives of the german embassy, peruvian universities, ministry, german schools, tourism agencies and conservation organisations were present.

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

We concluded successfully the investigation to the acoustic communication of Giant Otters under water, which was realized together with Massoud Yasseri in the Zoo of Hagenbeck in Hamburg. We have been able to record sounds of Giant Otters under water (a publication is in work).

The investigations to the contamination of fish with mercury (mercury is used by goldminers) within our study area also came to an end. The analysing of our samples was done by Arno Gutleb from the University of Veterinary in Vienna (a publication is in preparation).

Heide Khanmoradi from the University of Munich finished her thesis about diet ecology of Giant Otters. She analysed the scat samples which we collected within the framework of the project from 1991 to 1993.

Giant Otters are highly endangered by the destruction of tropical rainforest. Most of the activities leading to deforestation (gold-mining, oil exploration, lumbering, tourism) are connected with the industrial countries. To draw attention to the endangered Giant Otters and the destruction of tropical rainforest in Peru, public relations work also in Europe is important. In this context we published the book "Die Wölfe der Flüsse - Riesenotter und ihr Lebensraum Regenwald" and produced the film "Die Riesenotter vom Madre de Dios" which was on TV on the 17th of April 1995, 20.15, German TV, ARD, "Expeditionen ins Tierreich".

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REFERENCES

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This booklet may be ordered (please include 2\$ for national and 3\$ for international mailing; by plane: Europe: 5\$, World: 10\$).